

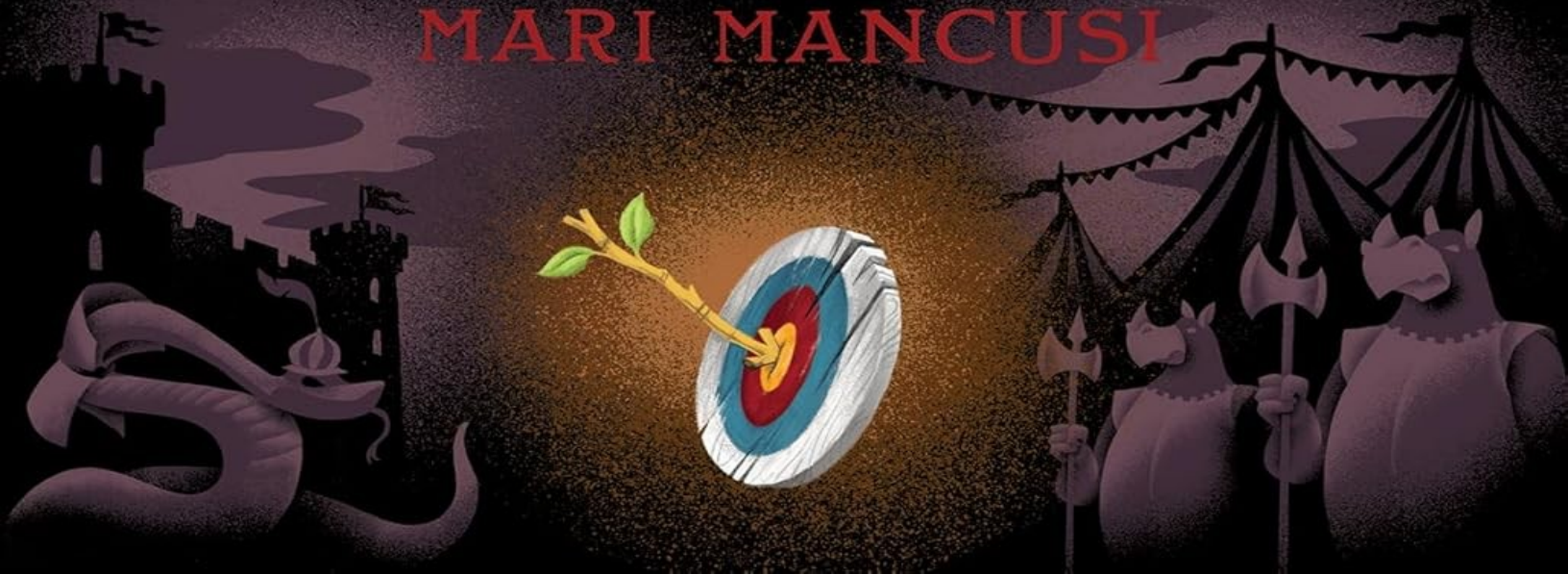
Disney

*What if Maid Marian
were the real outlaw?*

Princess of Thieves

A TWISTED TALE

MARI MANCUSI



PRINCESS OF THIEVES

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To my mum who, when I was a child,
would write down the stories I made up in
my head and let me draw the pictures.
Thank you for always encouraging
my creativity and imagination!

—*M.M.*

PROLOGUE

The moon was bright that night, large and orange and hanging low on the horizon—so low, in fact, you could almost imagine reaching up and plucking it from the sky to hold it in your hand. Its warm light flooded the castle's garden, illuminating the scores of delicate rosebushes that lined the winding cobblestone paths—the same rosebushes that had been planted by the castle's former queen mother, who had passed away three years before of a lingering illness, leaving her two grown sons alone.

One to rule a kingdom, the other to mourn his mother.

Crickets seemed to chirp a symphony while a gentle breeze rustled the leaves of an old apple tree standing in the centre of the garden. The tree had been another one of

the queen's pet projects—back when she was but a young lady, just wed. She had loved apples, perhaps even more than she had loved roses. And many still recalled the old days when she would sit under her tree and tell fantastical myths and legends to her two sons, Richard and John, both of whom had adored their mother and shared her love of apples.

It was under this tree that two young foxes now stepped towards each other, silhouetted by the bright, low-hanging moon. One was dressed all in green, with a red-feathered cap on his head and a large wooden bow strapped to his back, along with a quiver full of arrows. The other fox—a vixen—wore a soft lavender gown that cinched at her waist and fell to her feet, her head covered by a hat with a long pink veil that framed her sweet yet saddened face.

As they stepped closer, their eyes met and they both sighed, almost in unison.

‘Do you really have to go?’ asked Maid Marian, daring to speak first. She pulled anxiously at the hanging silk of her veil, shifting from foot to foot as her eyes darted around the courtyard. As niece and ward of King Richard, she had spent many happy hours frolicking in this very garden—often with her current green-clad companion, Robin of Locksley, a noble fox from a nearby estate. But though only a handful of years had passed since those innocent childhood

days, they seemed a thousand years ago as she gazed upon her best friend's face.

Robin reached out, brushing a soft paw against Marian's cheek and coming away with a glistening claw. It was only then that she realised she must have been crying. Though who could blame her, really, when she was being forced to say goodbye to her best and only friend?

'King Richard needs me,' Robin reminded her, his voice low. 'And when the king calls, we, his loyal subjects, must answer.'

Marian nodded, knowing his words to be true, as much as she didn't care to hear them. He was right, of course. The king, her uncle, needed every able-bodied animal he could find to assist him in his fight for justice in a neighbouring kingdom to the north. The kingdom had recently come under siege after its ruler died suddenly, leaving only a small cub as heir—a cub completely defenseless against the rogue country lords who saw fit to take advantage of his youth and stake their personal claims to the throne. Without someone stepping in to defend the rightful ruler of the land, the kingdom would fall into chaos and disrepair, and the animals would suffer for it all. King Richard declared he wouldn't let that happen—not under his watch.

So he'd taken off to defend the land, leaving his younger brother, Prince John, on the throne. Marian was proud of her uncle for standing up for what was right. But she worried for him all the same, being out there daily on the battlefield.

And she would worry for Robin too.

'Don't get me wrong,' she murmured. 'I'm grateful there are those like you and my uncle to stand up for the poor and downtrodden. But, Robin,

please be careful. So many English have already lost their lives in this war. And you are still so very young.'

Robin's mouth quirked into a sly grin. 'Come, Marian,' he chided gently. 'I may be young, but it must be said, I'm not that easy to kill.' He reached behind him to stroke his favourite bow. 'Why, by all rights the enemy should be afraid of me, not the other way around. After all, I'm the best archer in all of England, or haven't you heard?'

'You may have mentioned it once or twice,' she admitted with a small laugh. Robin could be cocky, but deep down it was one of the things she liked about him. He had so much confidence in himself. He never let anything—or anyone— get under his skin. She wished she could be more like that sometimes, instead of always feeling as if the weight of the world were resting on her red-furred shoulders.

'Trust me, I'll have the enemy shaking in their boots,' Robin declared, patting his chest with his paw. 'Or my name's not Robin of Locksley.'

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'I'm sure you will,' she agreed with a smile. Then it slipped from her face. 'But promise me you'll be careful all the same.'

Robin's expression grew serious. 'I promise,' he said, meeting her eyes with his own. The cockiness had vanished, and she saw nothing but sincerity swimming in his dark pupils. 'But I must insist you make me a promise too?'

'What promise is that?' she asked, holding her breath.

'Promise you won't forget me while I'm gone/ he whispered.

Marian felt heat rise to her cheeks. She was suddenly thankful it was dark so Robin couldn't see her blush. They'd been friends for nearly all their lives. In fact, Robin had been the very first fox she'd met when she arrived at the castle after her parents had passed away and her uncle and aunt had agreed to take her in. She'd been so sad and shy and scared back

then—just wanting to crawl into a dark corner of the castle and disappear into her grief.

But Robin wouldn't hear of this. Instead, he insisted she abandon her castle hideaway and take full advantage of all the kingdom had to offer, whether it be archery practice in the castle courtyard or running wild through the moors at midnight, dancing under the light of the moon. They'd wander through the villages, joining the local children in their games of tag and hide-and-go-seek, or sneak out in the rain to roll down mud-drenched hills, racing each other until they reached the bottom, laughing so much they could barely breathe. Marian had gotten so dirty on that particular adventure that when she finally limped home, her aunt claimed she didn't recognise her and had to call on her nursemaid, Lady Kluck, to throw her in a bath before she'd be allowed to join them at dinner. Robin had found that endlessly hilarious.

And the next time it rained? He insisted they do it again.

So yes, their friendship had always been strong. But lately there seemed to be something else tugging at the edges, something she'd never felt before. And it made her feel both terribly happy and strangely sad. Especially now.

'I promise,' she murmured, forcing herself not to turn away, to instead look into his eyes and memorise his face. After all, this might be the last time she saw him for years.

The last time she saw him ... ever.

'Well then, see? Now *that* is something worth staying alive for!' Robin declared, his cocky grin returning to his face. He tipped his hat in her direction and made a fancy bow. She giggled; she couldn't help it. But at the same time, she felt a knot form in her stomach. She knew he was

talented. She knew he was brave. But she also knew war could be terrible—even for those who were talented and brave.

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But what could she say, except goodbye?

‘I hope to see you soon,’ she whispered.

‘You will,’ Robin promised, putting his paw over his heart as if swearing an oath. ‘And when I return, there will be nothing to keep us apart, ever again.’

CHAPTER ONE

Three Years Later

‘I still can’t believe it’s been three years since I set foot on English soil,’ Marian remarked to the captain as he helped her off the ship’s gangplank and onto the soil in question. She grimaced as her foot promptly sank into the mud. ‘Though ... it appears little has changed.’

The captain laughed appreciatively, and Marian shot him an impish grin before turning to take in the small, quaint fishing village nestled on the shores of the English Channel where they had anchored moments before. Mud or no, she was thrilled to be back in the land of her childhood.

Three years was a long time to be away. But after her uncle, then Robin, had left to fight in the war, she’d found herself alone and restless, wanting a new challenge- So she had decided to make good use of her time, going back to her home country and enrolling in a university program where she was allowed to study politics and even join the archery club, (Thanks to her childhood antics with Robin, she’d always been good with a bow.)

It was the politics that interested her most—and always had. Back when she was a young fox, she would often hide out under the large wooden table in the king’s council room and listen in on the council members’ talks—until, of course, she was invariably caught when she couldn’t resist blurting out her opinions on the topic at hand from her secret spot. Even then, however, her uncle usually allowed her to stay, amused by his mischievous young niece’s gumption. And he would insist everyone at the table take her words seriously. ‘After all, she is a citizen of England,’ he’d declare. ‘Here, everyone’s opinions matter.’

That was why, when she had gotten the letter from King Richard the month before, informing her that the war was over and he was coming home and hoped she would join him on his council—officially, this time—

she'd booked passage on a ship immediately. As much as she'd loved her time in Paris, she'd missed England.

In truth, she missed someone else even more.

For if King Richard was coming home, she'd realised, that meant Robin would be too. Three years earlier, she'd

made him a promise that she'd wait for him, and she wasn't about to break, it for anything—even if the thought of seeing him again was both thrilling and terrifying at the same time.

Her eyes lifted to the horizon. What if he had changed? War could do that to someone, she knew. When she saw him again, would he still be her Robin—her best friend... and perhaps something more?

She shook herself. There she went again. She needed to pull herself together. She was a member of the king's council now, after all, not just some silly child with a crush. Which meant she needed to find her carriage and get herself to the castle to meet her uncle as she'd planned. And maybe, if she was lucky, she could take a hot bath and a long nap. Travelling by ship was always exhausting and never failed to upset her stomach.

She thanked the captain, then started towards town, this time picking her steps more carefully to avoid any more mud. As she grew closer, she spotted the carriage that the castle had sent for her sitting on the side of the road—the lion crest of King Richard's noble house emblazoned on its side. Her heart pounded excitedly. Who had they sent to pick her up? Could it even be her uncle himself, wanting to surprise her?

But no. It was not the king who leapt from the carriage. Instead, it was a large wolf with shaggy grey fur and

a brown tunic over a shirt with puffy purple sleeves. When his eyes fell on Marian, he grinned widely, revealing shiny white fangs.

‘Ah, there she is!’ he declared. ‘Welcome to England, m’lady. It is lovely to see you again!’

Marian cocked her head, puzzled at his familiarity. Did she know this wolf? He certainly seemed to know her. And she supposed he did look vaguely familiar, but for the life of her, she couldn’t quite place him.

‘Hello,’ she said, not wanting to be rude. ‘It’s good to see you ... again too . . . sir.’

The wolf’s eyes narrowed. ‘You don’t remember me, do you?’ he asked, sounding a little hurt. Then he smiled again, though this time it appeared to be a bit more forced. ‘But then, why would you?’ he added with a harsh laugh. ‘You were a noble lady back then, and I was merely the son of the castle groomsmen. But we did play together, from time to time. So I thought maybe ...’ His voice trailed off.

Marian pursed her lips, thinking hard for some recollection of this. It took a moment, but at last she thought she remembered: a young wolf cub at the castle who had always begged to join in on her and Robin’s games. Which would have been fine, of course—except that every time they did decide to include him, he would invariably attempt to cheat and wouldn’t be very nice to them if they dared point it out.

And heaven forbid he lose at something. They’d never hear the end of it.

Not her favourite childhood companion by any means.

But that was many years ago, she scolded herself. Surely, he’s changed like the rest of us.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, smiling as widely as she could. ‘I’m just a bit off from my long journey. Of course I remember you. Eustace, right? It’s so lovely to see you again.’

The wolf smirked, looking satisfied. ‘Likewise, Lady Marian,’ he said. ‘Though actually these days I go by Sheriff of Nottingham.’

Marian watched as he patted his chest proudly. It was then that she noticed the shiny badge attached to his tunic, assumedly indicating his official position.

‘Well!’ she exclaimed, trying to keep her voice light. ‘A sheriff. That’s impressive.’ And surprising too, she thought, as she tried to imagine the cheating little wolf cub now tasked with upholding the law of the land. It wasn’t the first job she would have imagined him in, that was for sure.

‘Oh, it gets me by,’ the sheriff said, waving her off as if she’d embarrassed him. Then he motioned for her to enter the carriage. ‘Of course, it’s not always easy, you know. What with all the lawless creatures of this kingdom trying to take advantage of the crown.’

Marian frowned. ‘What do you mean?’¹ she asked as she sat down in the carriage.

The sheriff rolled his yellow eyes as he took his seat across from her. ‘Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing interesting to a grand lady like yourself,’ he said dismissively. ‘But let’s just say I’ve been forced to lay down the law round these parts every once in a while. Keep these subjects in line. Not to mention collect the taxes. It’s an important job, though it doesn’t always endear me to the king’s subjects,’ he added with a dismissive laugh. ‘But you know how commoners can be. Always happy to take handouts but never interested in parting with any coin of their own—even for the good of the realm.’ He smirked. ‘Of course, I have my ways of helping them see the light.’

‘I see,’ Marian said, though she didn’t much like what he was implying. She could only imagine his methods, and she was pretty sure they weren’t well-intentioned. She was definitely going to need to speak to her uncle about this character once she’d secured her place on the council.

‘Bah! It’s all in a day’s work!’ the sheriff added airily, as if she’d just complimented him on his achievements. ‘After all, we don’t want Prince John’s kingdom to fall apart, you understand. Not on my watch anyway!’

‘Prince *John*’s kingdom?’ Marian repeated, frowning. ‘You mean King Richard’s, of course. I mean, now that he’s back and all,’ she added hastily.

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The wolf raised his bushy eyebrows. He looked both shocked and perhaps a bit pleased, as if he delighted in knowing something she did not. Marian felt a small chill run down her spine.

‘Oh, m’lady!’ he exclaimed, slapping his paw to his forehead. ‘Do not tell me that you have not heard the news! I was sure someone would have informed you by now!’ He shook his head. ‘Well, this is embarrassing.’

‘Informed me of what?’ Marian asked, her heartbeat growing faster by the moment. Had something happened to her uncle? Something bad? Alarm rose inside of her. ‘I thought the war was over. That everyone had returned to England.’

The sheriff gave her an apologetic look. ‘The war *is* over. But I’m afraid our good King Richard did not return to the castle with his knights. They say there was an . . . attack on the journey home—on English soil no less! The men were unprepared.’

Marian stared at him, trying to comprehend what he was saying. She was suddenly glad she was sitting down, because she was pretty sure her legs would not have held her weight.

In the meantime, the sheriff barrelled on: ‘We don’t know who was responsible, or the reason for the attack, for that matter. For all we know it was random—simple bandits looking to plunder from good, God-fearing folk. Between you and me, these kinds of ruffians usually act first and ask questions later.’ He rolled his eyes, as if disgusted by the so-called ruffians’ lack of courtly manners whilst out in the woods, thieving.

Marian tried to swallow past the huge lump that had formed in her throat. ‘But the king’s going to be all right, isn’t he?’ she asked, her voice

croaking on the words. 'He was injured and he's recovering. And Prince John is just filling in until he's back?'

But even as she asked it, she could see the truth in the sheriff's eyes. He pulled his hat off his head and placed it over his heart. 'I'm so sorry, m'lady,' he said solemnly. 'But I'm afraid your uncle is now spending his days with the angels. And Prince John will be officially crowned as his successor once he is finished with his time of mourning.'

Marian sank back into her seat, feeling like she was going to throw up. Her uncle was dead? Killed by common bandits in the woods? She couldn't believe it. It seemed so inglorious somehow. To survive years at war only to be killed on your way home?

Oh, Uncle, she thought. You didn't deserve this.

She closed her eyes, her grief threatening to consume her. Richard had been so good, so kind to her—a father in every sense of the word. She had been looking forward to

seeing him again, showing him how grown-up she was now, how ready she was to help him run his kingdom.

Her homecoming was supposed to have been a dream come true.

But it was feeling more like a nightmare.

CHAPTER TWO

Marian felt the sheriff's eyes on her, studying her intently. She forced herself to square her shoulders, to try to regain her composure, at least on the outside. She was not a little kit anymore, she reminded herself, but a member of the king's council. She needed to act accordingly.

Except. .. was she? After all, it was Richard who had asked her to be on his council. And now Richard was dead.

‘So Prince John has inherited the throne?’ she managed to ask.

She tried to recall what she knew about her uncle's younger brother. Since she was niece to the king by his late wife's family, she was no blood relation to John. But she had seen him quite a bit at the castle while growing up. From

what she remembered he wasn't a warrior like Richard. He wasn't strong and had never been interested in swordplay or archery. Instead, he seemed to prefer rich food and long books and spending time with his beloved mother. Until she had died, of course. Marian remembered that day clearly. While everyone in the kingdom had loved the sweet queen mother, she and John had been especially close, and he had taken her death quite hard. At the time, some believed he would never fully recover from the loss.

And now he'd lost his only brother too.

The sheriff nodded. 'He has,' he confirmed, 'Of course, it hasn't been easy for him.' He shook his head solemnly. 'Thankfully he has his court advisor to help him rule while he grieves.'

'Court advisor?' Marian asked.

'His name is Sir Hiss,' the sheriff explained. 'He's a serpent of some regard, and he's been serving at Prince John's side for years now. He is a master of strategy and tough on crime. Charming fellow, really. I'm sure you'll like him.'

Marian wasn't sure about any of this, but then she wasn't thinking very straight at the moment. The air in the coach had grown stuffy—difficult to breathe—and her stomach was becoming more and more upset by the moment. She glanced out the window, seeing that tile carriage had

stopped in the centre of a small village. The coachman had gotten off his seat and appeared to be helping one of the horses remove a rock from his shoe. Marian heaved a sigh of relief as she realised where they were.

‘Why, it’s the village of Nottingham!’ she exclaimed. She turned back to the sheriff. ‘Can I get out for a minute? I’m feeling a little ill. I just need some air.’

Without waiting for a response, she leaned towards the coach door and reached for the handle to open it, but to her surprise, the sheriff put a paw out, blocking her path. His beady yellow eyes lowered to her face.

‘M’lady,’ he said in a patronising tone. ‘You have been gone from England for a very long time. And I must warn you, the villages now are quite unlike the ones you might remember from days of old.’

Marian stared at him, puzzled. ‘What is that supposed to mean?’ she asked.

He shrugged carelessly. ‘It’s the animals, really. They can be, well, dangerous beasts at times. Especially to a well- dressed lady like yourself. Step outside the carriage and you’re sure to put yourself at risk of being robbed . . . or worse.’ His eyes narrowed. ‘Remember what happened to the king.’

Marian turned back to the window just in time to see two young bunnies and a small turtle wearing glasses kicking

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around a cloth-bound ball in the road. One bunny shot the ball up in the air, clearly frightening the turtle, who proceeded to hide his head in his shell. As the ball bounced off the spot where his head had just been, the

younger bunny burst out laughing, rolling on the ground and holding his white-furred belly with his paws.

Marian gave the sheriff a bland smile. 'I think I'll take my chances with the ruffians,' she declared, grabbing his arm and purposefully moving it out of her way. His face told her he wasn't pleased by this, but he said nothing and allowed her to exit the carriage.

As she stepped out onto the dusty road, she scanned the area, trying to reorient herself to the town. She and Robin had come here often as children to play with the others and stuff themselves with cakes from Master Benedict's bakery just down the road. In fact, they'd often eaten so many that they'd ended up returning to the castle with bellyaches and no room for dinner. She was especially fond of the ones made with blackberries and clotted cream.

She turned to look for the shop. Maybe she'd grab a few cakes to bring back to the castle with her, comfort food to ease her hurting heart. But to her surprise, where the shop once stood now sat a dilapidated shack with boarded-up windows. And the sign out front that used to proudly read *BEST BAKED GOODS IN NOTTINGHAM* had

been slashed with red paint, and the words *closed for* unpaid taxes were written below it.

‘Unpaid taxes!’ she murmured, confused. ‘That seems strange. Master Benedict always did such a brisk business. How could he have not afforded his taxes?’

It was then that she realised he wasn’t the only one. All along the road sat other former shops, similarly boarded up and abandoned, each with the same red paint splashed across its doors.

Marian felt an uneasy swell in her stomach. What was going on here? This village of her childhood, once so bustling and full of life, was now looking as if it had been through a war itself. The once sparkling stone fountain in the centre square was dried up and cracked down its side. The wooden benches that had once been filled with grannies watching their grandbabies play were rotted and decayed. Even the roads seemed in immense disrepair, with huge muddy potholes that could swallow a wagon wheel. It was a miracle their horse had only obtained a rock in his shoe and had not gone completely lame.

‘Excuse me, fancy lady?’

Marian whirled around, surprised to see another small bunny hop up behind her. She appeared to be very young—much younger than the ones Marian had seen earlier in the road playing with the turtle. She wore a long bluish nightdress, even though it was the middle of the day, and dragged a small straw-stuffed rabbit through the dirt behind her.

But it wasn’t her outfit or her age that struck Marian the most. It was her eyes, which were large and hollow and hungry-looking. As she gazed up at Marian, her small pink nose twitching, Marian felt her heart squeeze. She crouched down to the girl’s level and addressed her kindly.

‘What is it, my sweet girl?’

‘Do you have any food in that fancy carriage of yours?’ the bunny asked. ‘For I am so very hungry.’

Poor child! Marian cringed at the desperation she heard in the young bunny’s voice. She opened her mouth to reply, but at that moment an older rabbit—perhaps the girl’s mother—hopped up and took the bunny by the paw, pulling her away.

‘Now, Tagalong,’ she scolded. ‘What have I told you about talking to strangers?’

The young bunny hung her head in shame. ‘I’m sorry, Mama,’ she whimpered. ‘I just thought she might have some food. She looks very fancy.’ She gave Marian a sulky look. ‘And fancy folk *always* have more food than we do?’

‘Tagalong!’ her mother cried, looking shocked; ‘Manners!’

‘Oh, she’s fine,’ Marian insisted, rising back to her full height to address the mother rabbit. ‘I don’t mind at all. And she’s not wrong—I actually do have some extra food? She reached into her satchel, remembering the leftovers from her lunch on the ship that she hadn’t eaten due to her seasick stomach. It wasn’t much, but it was something at least.

But before she could pull the food from her bag, she felt a paw grab her roughly by the arm, sharps claws digging into her skin. Looking up in surprise, she found the sheriff suddenly looming above her, a frown etched on his wolfish face.

‘Now, now!’⁵ he rebuked her. ‘Didn’t you listen to a word I said? This is exactly what I’ve been talking about. These creatures would rather beg for handouts than work for their bread like proper subjects who care about their kingdom. We can’t have that! It’s just not right!’ He turned to the mother and baby. ‘Now scram! Beat it! Leave Lady Marian alone!’

The baby bunny’s face crumpled. Fat tears slid down her white cheeks. Marian felt her pity shift to anger. She turned to face the sheriff, her eyes blazing.

‘Get back in the carriage,’ she said, seething. ‘And mind your own business. I am the niece of the king of England and I will not take orders from you?’

The sheriff looked startled. It was clear he hadn’t had anyone stand up to him recently. For a moment, it appeared as if he wanted to argue with her. But Marian stood her ground, crossing her arms over her chest and staring him down. He sighed and rolled his eyes.

‘Have it your way,’ he muttered. ‘Just don’t come crying to me when they try to rob you blind?’ He *hmfrh-ed* loudly, then crawled back into the carriage, leaving Marian alone with the two bunnies.

Marian sighed. ‘Now, where were we?’ she asked, reaching into her satchel again. She found a carrot wrapped in a white cloth and pulled it out. As she unwrapped it, she felt the eyes of the baby bunny on her, her nose twitching furiously. When she had finished, she held it out.

‘Here you go,’ she said. ‘All yours.’

‘Are you sure?’ the mother rabbit asked. ‘I mean, it’s very kind of you, but—’

‘She’s *sure*, Mama!’ Tagalong broke in. ‘She’s *very sure*¹. Right, fancy lady?’ She looked up at Marian pleadingly.

Marian smiled. ‘You can call me Marian. And yes, I’m very sure,’ she agreed. ‘Think of it as a gift from the court. It would be a dreadful offense to turn down a royal gift, would it not?’

Tagalong nodded eagerly. ‘Dreadful offense,’ she agreed before plucking the carrot from Marian’s paw and chomping down on it with little buckteeth. Her mother laughed, then turned back to the fox.

‘Thank you, m’lady,’ she said gratefully, bowing low. ‘You don’t know how much this means to us. And I promise you, we will not trouble you for more. We have our pride, you know?’

‘I’m sure of it,’ Marian replied. ‘However, I beg you not to let your pride get in the way of a full stomach. If you need anything at all, please come see me at the castle. My name is Marian, and I’m a member of the

king's council now. My door will always be open to the citizens of England?

The mother rabbit reached up to her face, swiping away a tear. 'Thank you, m'lady,' she said, bowing again. 'It has been a long time since we've been shown any kindness. I almost forgot what it felt like?

Marian gave her a sorrowful smile. This poor woman. These poor children. This poor town. What had happened here to make things so bad? She stole a glance over at the carriage, realising she had a feeling she knew.

Speaking of the devil, the wolf took that moment to stick his head out of the window. 'Can we please get back to our journey?' he demanded. 'Prince John does not like to be kept waiting?

Marian sighed, giving the mother rabbit a weary look. Then she climbed back into the carriage, and soon they were travelling again, through the rest of the village and up the grand hill that lead to the castle—her former and future home.

But what would she find behind those gleaming stone walls? She felt a shimmer of dread rise inside her. A dead king. His younger brother on the throne. And a suspicious- sounding snake making up the rules as he went—rules she was certain now were not in favour of her uncle's subjects..

But this would all change, she told herself. She was back. As a member of the king's council, she would have a voice too. And she was more determined than ever to use it;

And to find a way to make things better for all.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Could things be any better?’ Robin of Locksley declared grandly, elbowing his friend Little John—a bear who was not exactly the diminutive size his name would suggest—as they skipped lazily down the forest’s dirt path, kicking up dust in their wake. ‘I mean, look at us! Two carefree lads walking through the forest on a beautiful day, no responsibilities whatsoever! The sun is shining. The air is warm. Why, I can practically smell tonight’s delicious stew simmering on the fire back at our camp.’ He grinned widely, showing off bright white teeth. ‘This is the life, my friend. This is the life.’

‘It could be worse,’ Littlejohn agreed, reaching up and grabbing a honeycomb from a nearby bees’ nest. The bees swirled anxiously around him as he shoved it in his mouth, but he only swatted them away. ‘Though it could be better too. Like if we weren’t wanted men living in fear for our lives and all that.’

‘Bah!’ Robin scoffed, waving him off. ‘I’m not afraid. Not of that snivelling Prince John anyway. His soldiers might have sharp swords, but they’re not especially clever. Not to mention most of them won’t even set foot in Sherwood Forest, seeing as it’s so *haunted* and all.’ He grinned wickedly as he reached up into a nearby tree, smacking a low branch. The tree protested with a loud moan that echoed through the woods, a haunting

sound that had scared away many over the years and given the forest its reputation.

‘Very scary,’ Little John agreed with a smirk, patting Robin on the head. ‘And you’re right, I know. But even you gotta admit, it would be nice to sleep on an actual bed once in a while. Without being pelted by the rain.’ He sighed. ‘Guess that’s not in the cards for us, though.’

Robin shook his head. ‘Afraid not, my friend. Unless an honest-to-goodness miracle were to occur, I think we’re stuck with leaves for pillows for the time being. Maybe forever—if Prince John manages to keep his new throne.’

‘Bah! The phony king of England!’ Littlejohn grunted in annoyance. ‘The nerve of him—banishing us from his kingdom like he did.’ He huffed. ‘Seriously, someone really needs to put that cowardly lion and sneaky serpent back in their places.’

‘Well, it won’t be me,’ Robin said with a bitter laugh. ‘For that sort of crime constitutes an axe to the head. And, funnily enough, I’m quite fond of my head and the way it’s attached to my shoulders.’

‘It is indeed a very lovely head,’ Little John agreed. ‘It would be a shame for you to lose it.’ He smacked Robin on the back, almost knocking him over. Sometimes the bear didn’t know his own strength. ‘And hey, if I have to be an outlaw,’ he added, ‘well, I’m glad I’m an outlaw with you. You’re the best friend a bear could have, Robby. And you keep us all safe.’

Robin shrugged modestly. ‘I do my best, Johnny,’ he said. ‘Out of sight, out of mind, as they say.’

‘Words to live by,’ Little John agreed as they continued down the path. The bear started humming a lively tune, one he’d likely picked up from their minstrel friend, Allan-a-Dale, a rooster who loved to sing and play his lute during their nights by the fire.

It *was* a good life, Robin told himself as he listened to his friend hum out of tune—not the life he’d planned for, of course, but far better than others were facing in these terrible times. He had friends. He had food. And, most important, he had freedom. Not everyone could say that these days, what with Richard gone.

At the same time, he still mourned his old life on occasion—not that he’d ever admit it to Littlejohn. But late at night when the fire grew low and the songs grew quiet, he remembered the way things had once been. He hadn’t always appreciated it when he was young, he supposed, taking for granted his noble status and his fine manor house—no hassles, no responsibilities, no cares in the world. And he had assumed that when they came home from the war, all would go back to the way it was.

And if Richard had come home with them, it likely would have.

But instead, Richard was gone. And the king’s snivelling, self-absorbed brother was still on the throne, pretending like he deserved it. Robin had told Richard from the start it was a bad idea to leave the kingdom to his brother—even temporarily. But the king had reminded him that it wouldn’t be for long. How much damage could one do in just a few months? He hadn’t counted on the war stretching out for years. And he certainly hadn’t counted on dying at the end of it all.

Robin felt an ache deep in his heart. He missed his king—his friend. They’d fought side by side for three long years in a foreign land. Richard had never treated

their relationship as one between king and subject, but as one between equals, always asking Robin's opinion and treating it like it mattered. He had trusted Robin with his life.

And now, because of that, Robin thought bitterly, he was dead.

CREAK!

Robin stopped short at the sudden sound. His ears pricked, at attention. In one fluid movement, he reached behind him, grabbed the bow off his back and strung an arrow, then aimed it at the source of the noise. Beside him, Littlejohn unsheathed his sword.

'Who goes there?' Robin demanded. 'Show yourself before I loose this arrow.'

'Don't shoot! It's just me!' cried a hoarse voice. A moment later a portly badger dressed in brown robes emerged from the bushes, holding his furry paws in the air. 'Friar Tuck!'

Robin lowered his bow while John sheathed his sword. The two of them smiled at their friend. Friar Tuck lived and worked just on the outskirts of Sherwood Forest in a small, humble abbey where the animals went to pray. Because of this, Friar Tuck knew just about everything that was going on in the kingdom. And he would bring information to Robin and his friends when he could. They sometimes joked that he was an honorary outlaw.

'Sorry, brother,' Robin said, patting his friend on the back. 'We can't be too careful these days.'

'Believe me, I know!' Friar Tuck agreed huffily. 'Why, I feel like I'm risking life and limb every time I leave the abbey. But this time I couldn't stay away. Not with news this big.'

'Big news, eh?' Robin asked, raising an eyebrow. 'Let me guess: taxes have risen yet again?'

'Bigger?'

'Prince John has issued us all pardons and we're free to go home?' Littlejohn tried.

'All right, maybe not that big,' the friar replied ruefully.

'Well, then what is it, brother? Spit it out,' Robin urged, quite intrigued.

The friar lowered his voice. 'Lady Marian is back?

'What?' Robin almost dropped his bow. He stared at the badger, eyes wide and heart thumping. 'Marian? She's back? Are you sure?'

'I'm sure. In fact, I saw her with my very own eyes,' the friar informed him proudly. 'I was down at the docks, retrieving my monthly supplies for the abbey, and there she was, getting into a carriage with the sheriff of Nottingham?

Robin wrinkled his nose at the mention of his leastfavourite wolf. But his mind remained on Marian.

'Well, this *is* news,' he murmured.

His memory flashed back to the last day he'd seen her, under the moonlight in the castle garden. He would never forget the way his heart had wrenched as he was forced to walk away from her—leaving her standing forlornly under the apple tree, tears slipping from her big brown eyes. He'd wanted so badly to turn back to her and tell her he couldn't go—that he would refuse his king and refuse the war. But he knew, deep down, she wouldn't want him to do that—not really, anyway. She wouldn't want him to let down his king, her beloved uncle.

And yet in the end, he'd managed to do just that.

Oh, Marian, he thought miserably. *If only you knew how I've failed you.*

'Robin? Are you all right? You look as if you've seen a ghost!' Little John teased, poking Robin in the shoulder. The friar chuckled knowingly. He'd watched Robin and Marian grow up together and knew how close they'd been. He probably assumed he was bringing joyous news.

Robin shook himself, pushing his troubled thoughts down. After all, what good did it do to dwell on the past? It couldn't change anything in the present.

'Oh, don't you two start,' he scolded, trying to keep his voice light and teasing. 'What happened between Marian and me was a long time ago. Why, she's probably forgotten all about me.'

MAKI MANCUSI

'Sure,' Little John snorted, 'just like you've forgotten all about her, right?' The bear leaned in, batting his eyes at Robin as if he were a vixen himself. Robin groaned and shoved him away.

'Well, I suppose there's only one way to find out,' Friar Tuck declared. He gave Robin a knowing look. 'I imagine Lady Marian will attend

services at the abbey on Sunday. Perhaps you would like me to pass along a message to her?’

Robin scratched his head. It was a tempting offer, to say the least. If he wrote to her, she might decide to write him back. He could find out how she was doing, and *what* she had been doing while she was away. He didn’t like having this big black yearslong gap in his mind—where he didn’t know what his best friend had been up to. He wanted to know every adventure she’d had. Every stumble. Every time something had made her laugh. Every time something had made her cry.

He wanted to know it all.

But if he did write to her and she wrote back, what then? What if she asked to see him? What if she wanted to come to his camp? She was still a noble lady—and he a wanted man. He didn’t want to get her in trouble, put her in danger for his sake.

Also, she would have questions—questions he wasn’t ready to answer.

He turned back to Friar Tuck. 'Thank you for the generous offer,' he said. 'But I really don't have anything to say to her. At least not at present.'

He felt Littlejohn's eyes on him. He knew if he turned to look at him, he'd find pity swirling in the bear's big black pupils. Littlejohn knew—perhaps more than anyone—how much Robin had missed Marian while they were away at war, how much he still missed her to this very day.

But that didn't matter in the end. All that mattered was keeping her safe. He'd failed her uncle. He wasn't about to make die same mistake twice.

The friar looked at him suspiciously but then shrugged. 'Very well. Just thought I'd ask. I need to get back to the abbey now. Unless there's something else you need?'

'No.' Robin shook his head. 'We're fine. Thank you for bringing us die news.'

Friar Tuck nodded, then waddled down the path. Robin watched him go until he had turned the corner and was out of sight. It was then that Littlejohn poked him again.

'What's wrong with you?' he demanded. 'Your ladylove is hack and you don't even want to talk to her?'

'Please!' Robin forced a dismissive laugh he didn't feel. 'That was ages ago. We were children. What did we know about love?' He turned away from his friend, not wanting his face to betray him.

‘All right,’ Little John said with a shrug. ‘Have it your way.’ He put his arm around Robin, leading him along the path. ‘Now come on, let’s get back to the camp. The stew should be almost ready by now. And I’m starving!’

Robin nodded, and together they headed back in the direction of their secret camp. As they walked, Little John began to hum again, his steps light and almost dancing. Robin, on the other hand, felt as if his legs had been stuffed with lead as he trudged down the path, his mind continuing to torture him with questions about Marian. Had she changed over the years? Did she remember him? Did she still think of him as he thought of her?

Because though the years of war had been long, his feelings for the vixen had never wavered. And now they were all rushing back to him at once, as if wrapped in a raging tidal wave.

And he had no idea how to hold them back.

CHAPTER FOUR

If the village of Nottingham had seemed worse for the years, the king's castle looked better than ever, Marian decided, as they made their final approach up the steep hill to reach its powerful front gates. Its once weatherworn grey stone walls were now shining white, as if they had been bleached, and colourful flags flew confidently from the castle's many turrets—looking brand new and not yet battered from brutal English storms. The water in the castle moat sparkled in the sunlight—so clear she could see the colourful fish swimming beneath the surface—and the grand drawbridge lowered majestically, as if on its own, like a giant mouth yawning,

The carriage rolled over the bridge, under the well-oiled

portico and into the castle courtyard, which was hustling with activity. Rhinoceros soldiers were practicing archery in one corner and elephant blacksmiths were hammering out shiny armour and sharp weapons in another. A few rambunctious tiger cubs ran around the carriage, waving wooden swords and shouting for it to stop in the name of Prince John. Sons and daughters of nobility, Marian assumed, well fed and richly dressed. Her mind Hashed back to little Tagalong's big hollow eyes, and she felt a pang in her gut.

'Looks like the taxes are helping *someone*]' she muttered to herself.

As the carriage pulled to a stop, the iron gates behind them slammed shut with a loud clang. Marian and the sheriff exited their coach, stepping down onto a perfectly paved cobblestone path that lead straight to the castle's front door;

A crocodile dressed in a red robe and matching flouncy hat approached them, bowing low. 'M'lady,' he said in a crackly voice. 'I am so glad you have arrived safely. Your trip was smooth, I hope?'

'It was. Thank you.'

'Very good, m'lady. Now, if you will please come with me, the prince eagerly awaits you in his throne room.'

Marian nodded, trying to keep her composure even as her heart began to beat faster. It was one thing to think

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about Prince John as king in an abstract sense, quite another to step into the old familiar throne room and see him sitting on her uncle's throne.

'Thank you,' she said, working to keep her voice neutral. 'I am honoured he has made time to meet with me. And I assume my things will

be sent to my new rooms? I am rather exhausted from the long journey and could do with a hot bath after meeting with His Majesty.'

'Of course,' the crocodile agreed. 'The prince has set you up in your old chambers. The same ones you had as a child.' He smiled toothily.

'That is very gracious of him,' she said, though she wondered if this was actually a kindness. After all, the rooms she'd had as a child were small and located in a tower, some distance away from the main halls of the castle—fine for a young orphan fox but certainly not what a grown lady, not to mention a new member of the king's council, would typically command.

But maybe Prince John was just hoping to help her feel at home, she told herself. And in truth, with so much having changed, she was grateful for any familiarity.

She turned back to the crocodile. 'I'm ready to meet with the prince. Please lead the way.'

The crocodile nodded and motioned for her to follow

him. Marian started to do so, then stopped, realising the sheriff had fallen into step behind them. She frowned, turning to face him.

‘Thank you for escorting me to the castle, Sheriff,’ she said in her politest voice—one that she hoped left no room for argument. ‘But as you can see, I am now in good company. And I would hate to be the cause of your neglecting any of your very important duties.’

The sheriff’s mouth dipped into an unhappy frown. Clearly he didn’t appreciate being dismissed so abruptly. But all he said was ‘Of course, m’lady,’ in a slightly sneering tone. ‘I’ll leave you to it, then. As you said, I have much to do.’

And with that, he turned and stormed back towards the carriage. Marian sighed, watching him go. *What a miserable wolf*, she mused. Who would have ever thought he’d make a good sheriff? Never mind a collector of taxes. She would have to discuss this with the council once she was properly seated.

In the meantime, she followed the guard into the castle and down a long stone corridor that dead-ended at a pair of ornate bronze doors Marian knew opened into the throne room. It was a room she was very familiar with. She’d played there countless times as a small child on the floor

beneath her uncle's and aunt's thrones. But as she stepped into the room now, she had to stop herself from gasping out loud.

The throne room had been completely transformed— so much so that she barely recognised it. It was no longer the stark yet elegant chamber of her uncle, King Richard, who had always declared that simplicity and humbleness were the true hallmarks of power. Now it was a showcase of luxury and excess, with richly woven tapestries draping the walls and thick woven rugs covering the floors. Even the architecture had changed; where once Richard's throne had sat at the same level as his subjects so the king could meet with them eye to eye, it was now raised onto a newly constructed platform at the far end of the room, only reachable by several steps.

And that wasn't all. The throne was surrounded by large chests overflowing with gold and jewels—a treasure trove so large it spilled out onto the floor.

Marian bit her lower lip, trying to imagine what Richard would say if he'd walked into this vainglorious chamber. He'd be horrified. Disgusted. It was everything he had always despised about the monarchy.

But Richard wasn't here anymore. This was Prince John's realm now. And she was getting a very bad feeling things were Worse than she'd feared.

Trumpets sounded and the door in the back opened. A moment later a tall but lean lion dressed in a crimson robe hemmed in pure white ermine stepped into the room. He wore a crown made of gold and jewels that appeared rather too large for his smallish head. When he

caught sight of Marian, he grinned widely, revealing large white lion fangs.

‘Maid Marian!’ he exclaimed. ‘Finally, you’re here! I was getting so dreadfully bored waiting for your arrival’. He yawned loudly as he headed up the steps to his throne, sweeping a few jewels off the seat before plopping himself down on top of it.

Marian drew in a breath. ‘It was a long journey,’ she admitted. ‘But I am glad to have arrived. Even under such tragic circumstances.’ Her eyes rose to a portrait of King Richard on the wall and her heart ached all over again. It didn’t feel right, being back at the castle, in the throne room itself, and not seeing her uncle on the throne—like her world had been tipped upside down with no way to right it again.

Prince John followed her gaze, the crown slipping from his head and falling over one eye. He pushed it back irritably before giving a deep sigh. ‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘My poor, poor brother. It is an unimaginable loss for the kingdom. And for those of us who loved him.’

He sniffled loudly, reaching into his robe for a handkerchief to dab his eyes. ‘First Mummy, now my dear

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brother,' he moaned loudly—almost too loudly for the empty room. 'Tell me—how much grief should one handsome young lion be forced to bear?' He plugged his thumb into his mouth and began to suck it hard, looking quite forlorn. Marian resisted the urge to raise an eyebrow at the dramatic display. But then, everyone grieved differently, she reminded herself. Prince John's world had also been turned upside down.

'I can't begin to imagine how you must be suffering,' she said slowly. 'And if there's anything I can do—any way I can help—well, please know that I am here for you. We are family, after all,' she added, wondering, even as she said it, if he still considered her so.

Prince John nodded, unplugging his thumb from his mouth. 'Yes,' he said. 'Family. I have so little family left. So very few who understand how hard I work for the kingdom. Not that anyone appreciates all my sacrifices,' he added mournfully. 'Why, I work my paws to the bone for this kingdom, and all the animals do is whine and moan and * openly act out against me.' He scowled. 'You'd think they'd be grateful for all I've done for them! I am their king, after all!'

Marian thought back to her trip through Nottingham. The boarded-up shops, the hungry rabbits. The sheriff's boasts about collecting taxes and keeping the animals in

line. It was no wonder no-one respected the new law of the land.

But then maybe John didn't know, she rationalised. A king depended on his advisors and officials. Maybe he had no idea what was really happening on the ground.

'You know, I stopped in Nottingham on the way to the castle,' she said cautiously, hoping she wasn't overstepping her bounds. But she was to be a member of the king's council. And Richard had always lectured his council on the importance of speaking the truth. 'And I have to tell you,' she said, 'they don't seem to be doing very well.'

The prince frowned, looking confused. 'What do you mean by that?' he asked, his voice holding a thread of suspicion.

'It's just, well. .. they seem hungry,' she said, deciding to go for it. 'Like they don't have enough to eat. And the town is in such disrepair, I hardly recognised it. And then there's the shops. Half of them are shuttered for unpaid taxes.'

John opened his mouth to speak. But before he could say anything, a new voice rose from the back of the room.

'Well, then, perhaps they should have paid their taxes.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Marian whirled around just in time to see a longish snake slithering out from behind a door. He was dressed in a smart brown cap and matching cloak and stared at her with sharp, beady eyes as he made his way to the throne. Then he slid up the side and wrapped his body around the chair's arm.

‘Well, well,’ Prince John said, looking scoldingly at the snake. ‘Sir Hiss! It’s about time you showed up. I’ve been here for practically hours, greeting our esteemed guest all by myself. What have you been up to, anyway, that’s so important you couldn’t be on time?’

Sir Hiss gave a respectful bow to the prince, though he looked a little annoyed. ‘Oh, just running the kingdom,’ he muttered. ‘Nothing to trouble Your Majesty.’

Prince John slapped him on the back of the neck. 'Well, I suppose you're here now and just in time to meet our lovely guest. This is Maid Marian. She's my brother's niece, God rest his soul. Just back from Paris?

Sir Hiss's eyes rested on Marian for a moment, taking her in. Then he smiled slowly, revealing gapped teeth. 'Very nice to meet you, madam,' he said smoothly. 'And I apologise for my tardiness and interruption. Do go on. Tell us what you were about to say?

'She was talking about taxes!' Prince John interrupted. 'She's saying the animals are being taxed too much!' He frowned, scratching his head. 'That's not right, is it, Hiss?'

'Of course not, Your Majesty,' Sir Hiss assured him, flicking his tongue. 'As always, your brilliant tax plan is carefully calculated and exactly what it needs to be. But you know how those animals do love to complain,' he added in the prince's ear, though loudly enough that Marian could still hear him.

'They're not complaining,' she broke in before she could stop herself. 'They're starving. They have no money for food.'

'Then perhaps they should get jobs,' Sir Hiss said smoothly, not missing a beat. 'Like His Majesty here. He works so hard for his kingdom?

'I do,' Prince John agreed with a grin. 'I work hard all the time. Well, besides during my morning nap, of course.'

And my afternoon snooze. Then I do have an early bedtime, I suppose. But besides that?' He clapped his paws together. 'I work all the time.'

'It sure sounds like it,' Marian muttered, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

'Look, Lady Marian, clearly you have a kind heart,' Sir Hiss said, slithering closer to her. She felt herself involuntarily back away to add distance between them. There was just something about this snake that seemed . . . slimy. 'And it's so good of you to worry about His Majesty's subjects. But please understand, we're trying to survive as a country—under our recent tragedy. We are all making sacrifices, aren't we, Your Majesty?'

Prince John was staring down at his paws, which were covered in jeweled rings. 'Yes, of course,' he mumbled. 'We must all make sacrifices!' He removed one of the rings, then replaced it with another, even bigger one from the stack of jewellery sitting on a table by his throne.

'Besides, our citizens are happy to do it,' Sir Hiss added quickly, before Marian could remark on this. 'For they love their new monarch so very much.'

Prince John looked up with a goofy grin. 'I *am* very beloved, aren't I, Sir Hiss?'

'They sing of you in the streets, sire,' Sir Hiss agreed, then smiled smugly at Marian. She resisted the sudden urge

to pop him in the nose. She wasn't normally a violent fox, but he was pushing her to the edge. Where had he come from? How had he wormed his way into the throne room— and into Prince John's greedy heart? If Richard had been there, he'd have thrown the snake out—quicker than you could say 'flattery and false words'.

But Richard wasn't there. And he never would be again.

'You know,' Prince John exclaimed suddenly, 'we should celebrate your arrival. After all, you are family, like you said. Maybe we could throw a ball in your honour. To welcome you home.' He scratched his chin. 'Or maybe a feast. Mummy always did like to throw feasts when she had guests visiting the castle.'

'Oh, no!' Marian shook her head, horrified at the idea. Was he joking? A ball? When their king had just been murdered? A feast? When animals were starving in the streets?

'I mean, it's very kind of you to offer,' she amended hastily. 'But I don't need a ball or a feast, thank you.'

'Well, then what about a tournament?' Prince John barrelled on, clearly not getting the point. 'An archery tournament with a lovely prize. That's always popular with the nobles. Maybe you'd even be willing to give the winner a kiss?' He waggled his eyebrows at Marian, and she fought back a cringe.

‘Please! This is *really* not necessary,’ she protested. ‘I don’t need anything special. In truth, I’d just like to be put to work. That’s the reason I’m home, you know. Your brother invited me to serve on the king’s council. And I’d very much like to still do so, under your rule. I know I’m young, but I’ve studied politics in school. I know I could be of value to the conversation.’

Prince John glanced at Sir Hiss. His mouth dipped into a frown. ‘What is she talking about?’ he demanded. ‘What council? Who has a council?’

The snake rolled his beady eyes. ‘I’m sure I don’t know,’ he said haughtily. ‘But she is being very rude. Why, you’re trying to offer her a lovely celebration in her honour and she’s demanding some sort of job.’ He sniffed. ‘A job that doesn’t exist.’

Sir Hiss flicked his tongue at Marian, and she felt a bit of spittle land on her snout. Disgusted, she brushed it off and glared at the snake.

Prince John shook his head. ‘Indeed,’ he muttered. ‘Council! I’ve never heard of such a thing!’

Marian stared at him, astounded. ‘Of course you have!’ she protested. ‘Your own mother was a member of the council before she died. And you yourself were on your brother’s council before the war.’ She didn’t mention the fact that *John* had barely shown up for any meetings. But he had to

have known it existed. Was he just pretending? Or had he truly forgotten? None of this was making sense.

‘I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Prince John said sulkily. ‘And I don’t appreciate your bringing up Mummy when I’m already sad.’ He stuck his thumb back in his mouth and slumped in his throne, looking very grumpy. Sir Hiss gave him a sympathetic look and patted him on the arm with his tail.

‘It’s all right, Your Majesty,’ he said. ‘I’m all the council you need.’

Sir Hiss turned back to Marian with a self-satisfied smile. ‘Now, if that’s all settled, I’m sure you’re very tired from your long journey and would appreciate a good rest.’

Without waiting for her to reply, he tapped his tail against a small bell, alerting the two guards standing at the entrance to the room. ‘Joffrey, Gerald? Will you please show our special guest to her chambers?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the rhino to the left—Joffrey—as the rhino to the right—Gerald—opened the door and beckoned for Marian to follow. She shot one last look at Prince John, who was still slumped sulkily in his chair, sucking his thumb and refusing to meet her eyes. She sighed deeply, then started towards the exit. She’d almost reached it when Sir Hiss addressed his guards again.

‘One more thing,’ the snake declared. ‘Once you have escorted the lady to her chambers, please stand guard outside her door.’

‘Wait, what?’ Marian shot a look at the snake. ‘That’s really not necessary,’ she assured him. ‘I’ll be fine. I won’t need a guard.’

Sir Hiss opened his mouth, as if in shock. ‘Of course you do! You are a noble lady of the court. Which means we must offer you the highest level of protection against anyone who might wish you harm. After all, it’s

dangerous out there,’ he added with a small smirk. ‘I mean, look at what happened to your dear uncle! He thought he was safe too. Until he wasn’t.’

Marian frowned. She could tell the snake was enjoying this, and that his posting a guard had little to do with her protection. More likely it was a way for the snake to keep an eye on this new castle guest, make sure she played by his rules.

But at the moment there was nothing she could do about it. So instead she nodded to the guards before heading towards the exit. Just as she reached the door, she turned to get one last look at the slithering snake.

I’m watching you, she thought, narrowing her eyes at Hiss. *I know you’re up to something. And one way or another, I’m going to find out what it is.*

CHAPTER SIX

Marian tried to remain calm as the rhinos escorted her through the castle hallways in the direction of her chambers. But inside, her mind was whirling and her heart was aching. In one day, she’d learned that her uncle was dead, his subjects were suffering and there was a sulky child on the throne of England being controlled by a manipulative snake.

And her dream position no longer existed.

She tried to tell herself the king’s council should be the least of her concerns. After all, it was nothing compared to what had happened to her uncle. But she couldn’t help being disappointed by the turn of events. All she’d wanted,

her entire life, was to be on the king's council. To help others. To bring about change.

What did they expect her to do now? Just sit back and sew and gossip with the ladies of the court? Worry only about what dress she should wear to this feast or that ball? While the rest of the kingdom fell apart all around her?

No. She couldn't do that. That wasn't who she was—not even close,

'So this Sir Hiss character,' she remarked to her guards, trying to keep her tone casual. 'How long has he been serving as advisor to His Majesty?'

Joffrey shrugged his massive shoulders. 'Seems like forever,' he said. 'He showed up right after Richard left for the war. He and the prince have been inseparable ever since.'

Of course, Marian thought, a bitter taste in her mouth. Sir Hiss probably saw a lonely, scared lion, being forced by his big brother to take power. How lucky for John that Hiss was able to slip right into his world and help him fight his battles.

'Is that when the king's council was disbanded?' she pressed. Then she added, 'You do remember the council, don't you? The group of nobles who used to advise the king on important matters?'

Joffrey puffed out his chest. 'Of course I do. My father served as personal guard while they were in session. Then

Hiss came along and he was suddenly let go—with no warning whatsoever. He told me—?

He broke off abruptly, yelping as Gerald, the other guard, stomped hard on his foot. ‘What did you do that for?’ he demanded.

Gerald sniffed, horn in the air. ‘We have been tasked by His Majesty to escort the lady Marian to her chambers,’ he reminded Joffrey. ‘Not to engage in idle gossip with our betters.’

Joffrey hung his head. ‘Sorry,’ he muttered.

‘Oh, don’t mind me,’ Marian said, forcing an airy laugh. ‘I’m just trying to make conversation?’ She paused, then added, ‘So no-one knows where Sir Hiss came from? Is he even English?’

Joffrey opened his mouth to answer. But one look from Gerald had him close it again. Marian sighed. She wasn’t going to get anything more out of them, it seemed.

Finally, they reached the top of a set of stone stairs that dead-ended on a small platform with a heavy wooden door: the door to her childhood chambers. She’d recognise it anywhere. Joffrey opened the door and stepped aside, allowing Marian to enter.

Once inside, she twirled around, taking in her surroundings. While much of the castle had changed in her absence, her rooms looked exactly the same: the same giant

stone fireplace on the far wall that would produce a roaring blaze, the same four-poster canopy bed with its thick brown curtains and the same lead glass windows that looked out over the late queen mother's gardens. She walked over to the windows now, peering outside, remembering the last time she had stood in those gardens, under the light of the moon, saying goodbye to her best friend.

Oh, Robin, she thought. *Do you have any idea what you've come home to?*

'Ah, now there's a sight for sore eyes!'

Marian whirled around, her own eyes bulging as they fell upon the stout white chicken stepping out of the next room, a huge smile on her face.

'Lady Kluck?' she whispered. 'Is that really you?'

'In the feathers!' Lady Kluck declared, shaking the feathers in question. 'Though I should be asking you the same thing. You were such a skinny little kit when you left this castle. And now look at you! A grand lady!' She brought a powder blue handkerchief to her eyes, dabbing them. 'I can hardly believe it.'

Marian felt her cheeks heat to a blush. She smiled at her former nursemaid, who had practically raised her from the day she'd come to the castle after her parents had been killed. Kind and strict and fiercely protective, Lady Kluck had been like a mother to her growing up. And to see her again now? Well, finally Marian began to feel as if she was home.

She ran over to the chicken, throwing her arms around her and squeezing her tight. Kluck clucked awkwardly, as if surprised by the

sudden gesture of affection, but then wrapped her wings around Marian, giving her a warm hug.

‘It’s good to see you again too, dearie,’ she said. ‘I can’t wait to hear about all your adventures.’ She pulled away. ‘But first I’ve had the servants draw up a hot bath with rose petals and lavender to soothe you from your long journey.’

‘That sounds heavenly,’ Marian admitted. ‘Thank you.’

Her attendant turned to the rhinos, who were still standing in the room awkwardly, as if they weren’t sure what to do next. Kluck crossed her wings over her chest and shuffled the rhinos towards the exit. ‘Thank you for escorting my lady safely,’ she said with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. ‘You may leave us now. I can take it from here.’

Marian watched in amusement as her diminutive nursemaid practically shoved the massive rhinos out the door, then shut it firmly behind them. She knew they would likely stop just outside, to stand guard as they’d been ordered to do by Sir Hiss. But at least she wouldn’t have to look at them doing it.

‘So!’ Lady Kluck declared, interrupting Maria® thoughts as she walked over and placed a wing on her

shoulder, turning her around. She studied the fox with careful eyes. 'Are you all right? I have to assume you've heard the terrible news about Richard. I'm sure that came as a shock?

Marian nodded, feeling the tears well in her eyes all over again. She angrily tried to swipe them away with her sleeve. But Klick reached over, taking her paw in her wing and squeezing it gently.

'Let it out, dearie,' she soothed. 'It's all right to cry. I've certainly shed my share of tears these last few weeks?

So Marian sank down onto the bed and let the tears fall, allowed the sobs to escape her throat, choking out the grief and anger and frustration that had been knotted up inside . of her since she'd gotten off the ship on English shores. And through it all, Kluck sat beside her, not speaking—just holding her paw.

.When she had finished, Marian rose to her feet. She walked to the window and stared outside. 'Oh, Kluck. I was so happy to be coming home. But it's all become a nightmare. My uncle is dead. They've abolished the council. The animals are suffering in the towns and Prince John seems more concerned with feasts and tournaments than with helping them.' She turned back to her nursemaid. 'And don't get me started on that advisor of his!'

'Sir Hiss?' Kluck made a face. 'He's a piece of work, that one. I don't know what Prince John sees in him.'

Marian closed her eyes; feeling defeated. 'Oh, Kluck.
r What am I to do?'

'Now, now,' Kluck scolded, rising from the bed. 'You mustn't despair. It's bad for your complexion. Why don't H you just take your bath and have a long nap? Things are bound to look brighter once you're well rested?

Marian glanced over at her nursemaid, suddenly **uneasy**.
K Could she trust her? She hadn't seen her in three years. What had she been doing this whole time at the castle?
I What if she'd pledged her allegiance to Prince John? What if he'd placed her as Marian's new lady-in-waiting as a spy, reporting back to him or Sir Hiss?

Misery rose inside of her. Was there anyone she could trust? She looked out the window again, down at the queen 1 mother's apple tree.

'Robin,' she whispered. 'I can trust Robin.'

'What was that, dearie?' Kluck asked, coming over to I her side.

'Nothing,' she said quickly. She turned away from the | window. 'Please show me to my bath. And then there's | something I need to do.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

Marian had to admit the bath made her feel like a new fox. Once she'd emerged, she brushed her fur and changed into fresh clothes, which Lady Kluck had procured from the late queen mother's wardrobe since Marian's luggage from Paris had yet to arrive at the castle. The dress was a little large for her—tailored for a lioness, not a fox—but Kluck cinched the waist with a pale pink sash and Marian decided it would have to do. She affixed her veiled hat to her head and was ready to go.

'Are you sure you don't want a rest before you head out?' Kluck asked, peering at her doubtfully once she was dressed. 'You've been gone three years. Whatever it is you're itching to do, surely it can wait a few hours, after you've had a nice long nap.'

She sounded concerned. And maybe she was. After all, Kluck had always been a bit overprotective of her ward, back, when Marian was young. Perhaps she still felt the same responsibility to her. But Marian was no longer a child. And she didn't need anyone telling her what she should or should not do, even if it came with the best of intentions.

'I'm sure,' she told Kluck as gently as she could—while still being firm. 'But I promise to be back soon.'

She opened her chamber door to find Joffrey and Gerald still standing outside. They jumped to attention at the sight of her.

'Your ladyship,' Joffrey said, clearing his throat. 'Can we help you with something?'

Marian shook her head. 'Oh, no. That's quite all right. You stay where you are. I'm just going to pop out for a bit. I won't be long.'

The two guards exchanged glances. Gerald cleared his throat.

'What?' Marian asked, frowning. 'Is something wrong?' Her heart began to beat a little faster.

'Of course not, m'lady,' Gerald assured her. 'It's just, well, we were asked to make sure you stayed in your room for now. At least until it's time for dinner.'

Marian tried to keep her expression neutral. She'd figured they might try something like this. 'I appreciate that,'

she said. 'But I have somewhere to be. I promise to be back safe and sound, before dinner.'

She started to walk around them. They stepped immediately into her path, blocking her way.

'I'm sorry,' Joffrey replied, at least having the decency to look a little guilty. 'But the prince has insisted you stay where it's safe.'

The prince? she thought bitterly. *Or was it that slimy snake?*

. She glanced from one rhino to the other, sizing them up. They were big, but were they fast? Could she dodge them and outrun them down the stairs? But where would she go from there? The entire castle was filled with Prince John's men. She didn't have a prayer of getting out without at least one of them stopping her.

She reached into her satchel. 'Of course,' she said agreeably, pulling out two golden coins. 'But perhaps we could come to some mutually beneficial arrangement?' She gave them a meaningful look.

Joffrey looked at Gerald. Gerald shook his head.

'Back inside,' he said firmly. 'Now.' His grip tightened on his spear. 'Before I call for backup.'

Ugh. Marian fought back a grimace. This was clearly going to be tougher than she imagined. She slipped the coins back into her satchel. 'Very well,' she said, lifting her

chin high, as if none of this upset her in the least. ‘Do let me know about dinner.’

She retreated into her room. Gerald slammed the door behind her. A moment later, she heard a click, as if a key was being turned in a lock—from the other side.

Letting out a frustrated breath, she turned back to Kluck, who was watching her with pitying eyes. She squeezed her paws, her claws digging into her pads. ‘This is unacceptable,’ she growled. ‘I’m a noble lady. They can’t just keep me prisoner.’

‘They can, actually,’ Kluck said gently. ‘And it appears they are.’

Marian looked around the room—her prison cell—her heart wrenching. She’d always loved these rooms when she was a child. They’d felt like home. But to be trapped in them now—without even a good reason why! It was insulting at best, not to mention a bit terrifying.

Her heart beat as fast as she paced the room. What was she going to do? She needed to get to Robin. But she couldn’t do that if she was stuck in her room. She ran a paw through her red fur. ‘What am I supposed to do?’

‘You’re going to calm down for a start,’ Kluck scolded. ‘Panicking won’t help our situation.’ The chicken put a wing on Marian’s back and lead her over to the bed. ‘We’ll figure it out. We always do.’

Something in her tone made Marian want to trust her. Kluck had been a strict guardian back in the day, but she had always been loyal. Maybe she could send her to get word to Robin, let him know her situation.

‘Listen, Kluck,’ she started. But then she stopped as she watched the chicken get up and walk over to the fireplace, study it for a moment, then step close to run her feathers over the stones. Marian watched her in shock, her eyes widening in recognition.

‘The secret passageway!’ she exclaimed in delight, running over to join Kluck at the hearth. Of course! Why hadn’t she thought of it before? Of that time long ago when she’d been “trapped” in her room—not by guards, of course, but by Lady Kluck herself, who’d insisted young Marian go to bed at an early hour, far earlier than Marian felt was right.

Marian had tried to tell her nursemaid that she had other plans. There was a rare blue moon that night, and Robin wanted her to go see it with him. But Kluck had stood firm. At first Marian had thought she was doomed. But just as she was about to go to bed, she’d heard a loud creak coming from the fireplace, a door sliding open inside.

Robin had poked his head out, a mischievous grin on his face.

•You knew about the secret passageway?’ she asked

Kluck as she joined her in feeling the stones for the telltale rough edges. Would the loose stone still be there, so many years later?

‘You used to think you were so clever,’ Kluck. said with a smile. ‘Always getting the better of your poor old nursemaid. But I always knew what you were up to. And you were I never as alone as you thought you were?’

Marian couldn’t help a small smile at this, liking the image of Kluck being her secret guardian angel. And here she thought she’d gotten away with it all. She should have known better.

Just then her claw caught on a stone. Triumphantlly, she yanked it hard. There was a loud groan, and a moment later i the door inside the fireplace slid open, revealing a darkpas- ■
sageway beyond.

‘Yes!’ Marian exclaimed happily. ‘Now that’s more like it!’ She ducked under the stone mantel to climb into the hearth.

Lady Kluck sighed deeply. ‘So much for being clean I from the bath,’ she said wearily.

Marian gave an impish shrug. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I’ll wash up again before dinner.’

‘Indeed you will!’ Kluck said. ‘And you will hurry too, whatever it is you need to do. I’ll only be able to make excuses for so long before they start getting suspicious?’

Marian nodded. 'I will?' she assured her lady-in-waiting. 'And I swear I only slipped out a few times over the years. Only when it was ... truly necessary.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kluck rolled her eyes. '*Necessary*. As in Robin was involved, you mean. That fox was such a bad influence on you. A true scoundrel.' But she said it with affection in her eyes.

And suddenly Marian realised Kluck had guessed exactly where she was going—and what she planned to do.

After promising Kluck she'd be careful, Marian climbed through the secret door and into the dimly lit passageway beyond. It was cold and damp back there—so cold she felt it in her bones—and the only source of light came from cracks between the stones above, letting in mere slivers of sunshine. Fighting back a shiver, she used her paws to guide her as she felt her way down the low-ceilinged space until she came to the set of crumbling, steep stone stairs leading down.

She wondered how many still knew of these tunnels that lead through the castle and deep underground, one of them dead-ending at a large wooden door that opened out to the sea. According to Robin, these tunnels were originally

created as an escape route for royals, in case the castle walls were ever breached. But then there hadn't been a proper castle siege on English soil in ages, and the passageways had sat neglected for years—except when a young vixen needed an escape from her strict minder so she could go dance under a blue moon with her best friend.

Marian felt a smile creep to her face as she thought of that first escape. Robin had surprised her by coming in through the hearth like a thief in the night, and she had almost yelped in alarm at the sudden sight of him. But he had placed his claw to his lips to urge her to keep quiet—she didn't want to wake Kluck—then beckoned for her to follow him into the darkened space.

She'd been frightened at first—not that she'd ever admit it to Robin. He was always so cocky and brave. But still! Who knew what kind of creepy-crawly creatures made this dark, unused passageway their home? At one point, she'd almost broken and begged him to turn back around. But Robin had reached out and clasped her paw in his own, squeezing it tight. And she'd known, somehow, she had nothing to fear.

But Robin wasn't with her now. And as the cobwebs brushed at her face and her ears picked up faint scratching on stone, she felt her heart stutter a bit. Holding on to the wall for balance, she descended the steps as quickly as she could, stifling a sneeze as a cloud of dust bloomed in her wake.

'It's just dark,' she whispered to herself. 'There's nothing to be frightened of.'

Luckily, by the time she reached the bottom of the steps, her eyes had become better adjusted to the dim light. There she found two passageways leading in opposite directions. She frowned, tapping her claw on her chin, trying to remember which one led to the exit. The last thing she needed was to get lost in this maze of tunnels below the castle. She might never find her way out.

arrrrrrr. . .

She froze at the sudden sound, her heart leaping to her throat. What was that?

It came again—louder this time. Fiercer. She swallowed hard, grasping the wall for support, her heart pounding so hard she feared she'd break a rib. She'd heard strange sounds down there before—the skittering of beetles across the stone—but never anything like this. She was sure of it. It sounded like an angry ghost, or some kind of mythological beast.

She squared her shoulders, forcing herself to remain; calm. As Kluck had said, it would do no good to panic

and lose her head. Instead, she concentrated on choosing a path—the one that lead her away from the horrible sound. She began walking briskly, and then, as it came again, she broke into a full-on run.

Arrrrrrrrrr. . .

Suddenly her eyes caught a light at the end of the tunnel. She raced towards it, finding the door she sought. Her paws fumbled with the wooden beam that latched it shut, and then she opened it with a shove. The bright light from the sun almost blinded her with its brilliance after she'd been in the dark for so long, but she forced herself forwards, epplapsing onto the rocky beach outside, sucking in huge breaths as she tried to still her racing heart.

Once she had gotten herself back under control, she rose to her feet, went to the door and pushed it closed. Her shoulders slumped in relief. She was out. She was free. And whatever creature had made the noise was inside and couldn't hurt her.

It was time to find Robin.

CHAPTER NINE

Marian skirted the beach, keeping a wide berth from the castle and its surrounding village so as not to be spotted by any guards. When she had walked far enough away, she switched back, heading to the road that lead to Robin's ancestral home. It wasn't far from the castle, bordered by the ghostly woods of Sherwood Forest.

Marian felt her pulse quicken as she approached her destination. She hadn't seen Robin in three years. What would he say when he saw her? Would things feel the same between them—as if no time had passed? Or would they be different now—would he be different? After all, war could change an animal. It could harden his heart. What if Robin

Bad lost the feelings he once had for her, while she felt them just as strongly as ever?

She shook her head. She couldn't think that way. This was Robin, after all. Her best friend. The one who cared about her more than anyone else in the world. He'd made a promise to her that night in the castle garden. And Robin always kept his promises.

She rounded the bend, reaching the outskirts of the estate. The beautiful manor home had been in Robin's family for generations, not to mention a home away from home for her as a child. She and Robin had spent many happy hours frolicking on the grounds or sneaking into the kitchens to steal honey cakes when the cook wasn't looking. It was always a happy time at Locksley.

Her eyes lifted ... and she frowned.

The home stood where it had always stood. But it was not the stately stone structure she remembered. Instead, the building was unkempt, as if it had been abandoned for a good time. And the grounds surrounding it, always meticulously maintained by the many gardeners employed by the family, were now overgrown and strangled by weeds. She frowned—what was going on here? Robin's mother would never allow her gardens to look like this. Robin's father would never allow his estate to crumble.

Had they also become victims of Prince John's cruel taxes? Had they been forced from their family home? And if so, where were they now?

Where was Robin? Was he all right?

Worried, she picked up her pace, weaving through the tangled gardens and towards the manor house. When she reached the front door, she lifted

the heavy iron knocker, her heart filled with trepidation. She dropped the knocker against the door. Once. Twice. Three times.

There was no answer.

She tried again. Waited. But still no-one came to the door. She tried to tell herself not to think the worst. They could be out for a stroll. At the market, shopping. There were a thousand reasons they might not answer.

But still, she couldn't suppress her rising fear.

She tried the door's handle. It was unlocked. Drawing in a breath, she pushed the door open and stepped inside the home.

'Robin?' she called as she entered the foyer. 'Are you here? It's me . . .'

Her voice trailed off as her eyes adjusted to the dark room, horror falling onto her like a heavy cloak, threatening to suffocate her. The elegant estate she remembered from childhood now looked like a war zone. The place had been ransacked. Tables were tipped over, drawers upended, precious books torn apart.

‘Oh, no!’ she cried. ‘No, no, no!’

She heard a shuffling sound coming from the next room. She swallowed hard, willing herself to stand her ground.

‘Hello?’ she called out again. ‘Is someone here?’

Two figures stepped into the light: black-feathered vultures dressed in purple cloaks. One wielded a crossbow loaded with an arrow and the other carried a sharp-looking axe. They stared at her for a moment, then raised their weapons.

k ‘Who are you?’ demanded the first vulture.

‘And what do you think yer doing, trespassin’ in this here place?’ snarled the second.

Marian took a hesitant step backwards, her whole body shaking with fear. But she forced herself to square her shoulders, to lift her chin. No. She was the niece of the king of England. She would not cower in the face of these two scavengers.

‘I should be asking you the same question,’ she replied, working to keep her voice even, austere. ‘Who are you, and where are the owners of this estate?’

The two vultures exchanged glances. The one carrying the axe began to howl with laughter.

‘What’s so funny?’ Marian demanded, starting to get angry.

The second vulture shot an annoyed look at his friend.

‘Sorry about him,’ he said. ‘There’s a reason our mama called him Nutsy.’ He rolled his eyes. ‘The thing is, ma’am, the previous owners don’t live here anymore. And this here house is property of His Majesty Prince John of England.’

‘What?’ Marian sputtered, forgetting she was trying to play nice. ‘Prince John can’t just take over someone’s home. This has been in their family for generations.’ She paused, frowning. ‘Don’t tell me this is about taxes.’

‘Taxes?’ sputtered Nutsy, still giggling. ‘That’s a good one, right, Trigger? Taxes!’ He snorted, then locked his eyes on Marian. ‘Try *treason*?’

‘Treason?’ Marian repeated, horrified.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Trigger agreed. ‘Robin of Locksley is a traitor to the crown. And because of this, all his family’s possessions have been seized.’

‘But that’s impossible!’ Marian argued. ‘Robin’s not a traitor! He served the king in the war for years!’

‘The *former* king, maybe,’ corrected Trigger in a haughty voice. ‘But it seems your fox is no friend to His Majesty Prince John.’

Of course, Marian realised, a sick feeling settling in her stomach as it all began to slide into place. Robin must have come home after serving King Richard and seen what his successor had done to the kingdom. He must have said something—spoken out in some way. And in doing so, he angered the prince.

‘Where is Robin now?’ she asked, a little fearful of the answer. ‘Is he ... in prison?’

‘Nope!’ Nutsy replied gleefully. ‘He ran away like the coward he is! I reckon he went to Sherwood Forest. Where the ghosts probably got him!’

‘Quiet, you!’ Trigger scolded. His beady eyes settled on Marian. ‘You’re asking a lot of questions. But you haven’t answered mine. Who are you, and what do you want with Robin?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Marian said, backing away. She didn’t need these two going back to Prince John to inform him of her little visit. ‘I’ll just be going ...’

Trigger made a move to grab her arm. On instinct, she swiped his wing away, with a bit more force than she’d meant to, succeeding in knocking him backwards. His expression darkened as he scrambled to his feet. He raised his crossbow, putting Marian in its sights.

‘Won’t move!’ he growled. ‘Nutsy, go get the sheriff!’

Marian froze. The sheriff? She could not let them get the sheriff. She drew in a breath, then yanked her hat off her head, whipping it in the direction of the vulture. Trigger tried to loose his arrow, but it got tangled in the silk of the

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veil and the shot went wild, straight up to the ceiling, lodging in a wooden beam.

‘Why, you—’ he cried angrily, struggling to free himself from the tangle of silk. ‘Get her, Nutsy!’

The other vulture charged forwards with his axe. Marian dove towards the door, running with all her might. When she got through it, she kicked it closed with her back foot, slamming it into Nutsy’s beak. She heard the vulture bellow in rage as he hit the floor with a loud thud behind her.

But Marian didn’t turn around to look. She kept running across the overgrown field. A moment later, there was a whooshing sound—an arrow flying close to her ear, missing her by a hair. Her breath came in short gasp's and she picked up the pace, running as fast as she could. She heard

the vultures yelling behind her, giving chase. She wasn't going to be able to outrun them—not in this dress, anyway.

She spotted a farmhouse ahead. One of the serfs', likely, who had worked on the estate. There was smoke coming from the chimney and a line of wash in the back garden. Marian leapt over the fence and ducked down, trying to catch her breath. Her eyes rose to the laundry above her: a pair of men's trousers and a tunic and a cloak. Impulsively, she grabbed them off the line and quickly exchanged her

fancy gown for the new clothes, pulling the cloak's hood over her face. Then she leapt over the fence again and headed down the road, walking as if she didn't have a care in the world.

A moment later the two vultures caught up to her, panting.

^Excuse me, fine sir!' cried Nutsy. 'Have you seen a woman come this way?'

Marian pretended to consider this. Then she nodded. 'She went that way,' she said in a gruff voice as she pointed in the opposite direction. 'You should still be able to catch her if you're quick.'

Marian felt Trigger giving her a suspicious look. But before he could speak, his brother grabbed him by the wing. 'Come on, Trigger!' he cried. 'You heard the man! Let's go get her!' And with that, he took off flying in the direction Marian had pointed. Trigger gave her one last look, then followed his brother down the road. Soon they disappeared

Marian sighed in relief, slumping her shoulders. That was close—too close.

She glanced back to where she had come from—the former grand estate, now turned into just another asset for the greedy Prince John. Her heart ached for Robin. He'd given his youth to fight for his country, only to come home to this?

MARI M A N C U 3 I

To be stripped of his lands and titles and gold and called a traitor? It wasn't right. None of this was.

Her gaze travelled from the estate to the forest beyond. Sherwood Forest. Robin's supposed new home. She'd heard stories of the forest. It was haunted. It was filled with cutthroats and thieves. Even the king's men stayed clear of the place. And she'd been warned, all her life, never to set foot inside of it.

But now, what choice did she have? She could go back to the castle, back to her well-appointed prison. Or she could try to find Robin—the only possible ally she had left in the world besides Lady Kluck.

She drew in a breath and started walking towards the trees.

Darkness came quickly to the forest, the thick canopy of trees all but blocking out the setting sun. Shadows loomed, large and threatening. And Marian quickly realised she ought to have waited until morning to embark on her mission. If the forest was dangerous by day, it would be even more so at night. And finding a single outlaw—one who likely didn't want to be found—and his camp could prove impossible in the dark. She imagined herself walking in circles for hours as the temperatures dropped sharply, the cold seeping into her bones. She could die out there, lost in the woods. And it wouldn't even take a bandit or a ghost.

CHAPTER TEN

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At one point she seriously considered turning around,

fleeing the forest and sneaking back into the castle, where at least she had a warm bed and good food. But then her mind went to Robin and she forced herself to press on, pushing down her fear. She couldn't rest or eat—not until she knew he was all right.

She still couldn't believe they'd called him a traitor—: Robin, who had given his youth to join his king in war. He hadn't had to do that. As a noble, he could have easily begged off the duty. But Robin never cared about his rank. He cared about his king—so much so, he had been willing to die for him.

He should have returned home a hero. They should have been throwing him the feasts and tournaments Prince John had offered her. Instead, he'd been accused of treason, his family stripped of their lands. But why? Because Robin had stayed loyal to his king, even after his death? Because he hadn't accepted John on the throne?

She needed answers. And Robin was the only one who could give them.

The sun dipped lower, stealing away her already dim light. And soon a soft groaning seemed to rise in the air. It made her remember the moan she'd heard in the castle tunnels, and she fought back a shiver. All the stories she'd heard as a child about the ghosts of Sherwood Forest came rushing back to her. The ghosts were hungry. Bloodthirsty. Relentless. And if they found you, you would never leave the forest again.

But that's all nonsense, she scolded herself. Just stories made up to keep children away. There are no such things as—

Suddenly, something large dropped out of the tree in front of her—a bulky shadow, yellow eyes glowing in the darkness. Marian shrieked, stumbling and falling backwards, heart in her throat.

The shadow stepped forwards, and a low growl reached her ears. Now closer, Marian could better make out its features. It wasn't a ghost but

rather a big burly bear wielding a sharp-looking sword. He loomed above her, raising the weapon in the air.

A cutthroat. A thief.

Marian scrambled to her feet and took off running in the other direction, fast as she could go. Her heart pounded and her fur prickled with fear. Behind her, she heard the heavy stomping footsteps of the bear, gaining ground, and she forced herself to run faster, abandoning the trail and diving into the woods, hoping to find some cover. But it was too dark to see now. She could barely avoid slamming into tree trunks or tripping over gnarled roots. And still the bear kept coming.

What had she been thinking—wandering into the Woods alone? It was a fool's Quest, and now she would likely pay for it with her life. What would Lady Kluck think when she didn't return home? What would Robin think when he learned of her inglorious fate?

No. She had to keep going. She had to outwit the bear, find a way to survive. She couldn't give up. She pushed farther, faster, running with everything she had. And for a moment, she actually thought she might get away. The bear was losing ground behind her, perhaps tiring. If she just kept going—a little longer . . .

Suddenly she stopped short, her paws digging into the soft earth. In front of her, slashing across the forest, was a rushing river, far too wide and raging to cross. Her heart sank and her shoulders slumped. No! Not now! Not when she was almost free! In desperation, she squinted into the darkness, down each side of the riverbank. Maybe she could find a place less wide to cross?

It was then that she saw the fallen log. It was balanced perfectly on both sides of the river. Could it serve as a bridge? It didn't look too sturdy, but

it was her only hope. If she could get across, she could push the log into the water, leaving the bear no way to follow her.

Gritting her teeth, she approached the log, testing it with her foot before putting her weight on it. It seemed solid, at least, though it rolled a little under her, making it difficult to balance; she'd have to go slow if she wanted a chance. Drawing in a breath, she gingerly put one foot in front of the other, holding her arms out to steady herself. The log shifted under her feet, and she closed her eyes for a moment, whispering a prayer before taking her next step.

Just as she was about halfway across, she heard a noise in front of her. She looked up, her heart lurching as a shadow stepped out of the darkness on the other side of the river. She froze for a moment. Was it the bear? Had he found another way to cross? But then the figure stepped closer, and her eyes bulged from her head.

Not a bear, but a fox.

'Robin?' she whispered.

She hadn't seen him in three years. But she could never forget his face—his sharp eyes, his handsome snout, his cocky smile.

But he wasn't smiling now. Instead, he was reaching over his shoulder, pulling his bow off his back and nocking an arrow.

'Who are you, stranger?' he demanded in a low growly voice she'd never heard him use before. 'And what business do you have in Sherwood Forest?'

It was then that she remembered her disguise. She laughed nervously, reaching up and lifting the cloak from her head to reveal herself. But in her haste to show him, she lost her balance on the log, her foot slipping out from under her. Suddenly she was flailing, falling. Her head smacked hard against the log as she tumbled into the river below. She tried to scream, but water rushed into her mouth and she found herself choking as the strong current grabbed her and started dragging her quickly downstream.

She struggled uselessly, the river tossing her like a rag doll into rocks and roots. She tried desperately to claw at the tree branches sticking out from the shore or find a foothold by wedging her paw beneath an underwater stone. But it was no use. The current was too strong and too fast, taking her without remorse. At one point, her cloak caught on a rock and she was forced to untie it from her neck so as not to be choked by it. But once she was free, the river grabbed her again, dragging her farther downstream.

She was not going to make it to shore.

Except. ..

Suddenly she felt strong arms around her, encircling her waist. She yelped in surprise, taking in another mouthfill of dirty water as she was yanked unceremoniously out of the river and deposited onto dry land. She felt paws flipping her over, then slapping her hard on the back, and she coughed up the remaining river water, tears streaming from her eyes.

Sucking in a huge, gasping breath, she rolled herself back over and looked up at her rescuer. Robin's eyes glowed

in the darkness as he gazed down at her, his face filled with disbelief.

‘Marian?’ he whispered as if he were seeing a ghost. ‘Is that really you?’

‘Robin,’ she managed to murmur—before everything went black.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Robin stared down at the limp, unconscious Marian, his head spinning with confusion. What was she doing there? All alone in the forest after dark? She could have been killed. She almost *had* been killed. His mind flashed back to her flailing figure in the rushing water. If he hadn't managed to catch her before she had been swept too far downstream...

'Did you get him?' Little John called, gingerly making his way across the log bridge. 'Is it one of Prince John's men?'

Robin looked up at his friend, at first unable to respond. It wasn't like him to be speechless. But this was a special case. Little John leapt off the log and joined him at the riverbank. 'I tried to chase him off, but...' His voice trailed

off as he caught the vixen's face. 'Oh!' Even in the darkness, Robin could see his eyes widen in shock. 'Wait a second. That's not..

'It is,' Robin replied, finding his voice at last. 'It's Marian.' He reached down, brushing a drop of water from her face. Was she all right? How badly had she hit her head?

Little John cringed. 'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'I had no idea. The way she's dressed ... And it was dark!'

Robin looked up at his friend. 'I know,' he assured him. 'I would have done the same. We can't be too careful. And she did come out of nowhere.' His eyes went back to Marian, just in time to catch a fluttering of her lashes. Was she about to wake?

'I can't believe it,' he whispered. 'What are you doing here?'

His heart stirred painfully as he gazed down on her sweet face. It was one thing to pretend he didn't care about her when she was just a name on the friar's tongue. But now, with her lying in his arms, his feigned apathy was proving much more difficult to maintain. So many memories, so many feelings, were rushing back to him—as if his mind too, were a raging river, dragging him to the past.

He swallowed hard, his heart aching. *Oh, Marian,* he said. *In another world... another life...*

Her body shuddered, drawing him back to the present.

She was sopping wet, probably freezing. He grabbed his cloak, which he had wisely taken off before diving into the river, and wrapped it around her trembling frame. If only she would wake up!

'What do you want to do, Robby?' Little John asked. 'We can't just leave her here. Do you want me to drop her off at the abbey? Friar Tuck can take care of her until morning and then escort her back to the castle.'

‘Right,’ Robin said, his insides torn. He knew what John had suggested was the most practical solution. But at the same time, something inside of him didn’t want to just let her go again. He hadn’t seen her in three years. And to have to say goodbye again so soon . . .

‘Robin?’ John pressed.

Robin looked up. ‘Let’s take her back to camp first,’ he said. ‘It’s closer than the abbey, and she can warm up by the fire before we take her to the edge of the forest.’

‘What happened to no outsiders at the camp?’ Little John asked, raising an eyebrow.

‘Marian’s not an outsider,’ Robin replied. He paused, looking down at her soft face, then added, ‘And I trust her with my life.’

John nodded, placing a paw on Robin’s back to let him know he understood. Robin appreciated the gesture. He knew what he was doing was against his own rules. And the rules were made for a reason. After all, keeping the camp secret was the only way to ensure they all stayed out of prison.

But this was Marian. This was different.

‘She’s unconscious now. And we’ll blindfold her on the way back,’ he declared. ‘This way she’ll know we have a camp, but she won’t know how to reach it. I think the others will be able to accept that.’

‘I’m sure they will,’ John said with a smile. ‘After all, they know how you feel about Marian.’

Robin turned away, suddenly uncomfortable. How was that possible? How could they all know how he felt when he himself was so tangled in confusing emotions—wanting both to push her away for her own safety and to selfishly hold her close at the same time?

Oh, Marian, he thought. Whatever am I going to do?

CHAPTER TWELVE,

The camp was empty when Robin and Littlejohn arrived, with Marian still curled up in Robin's arms. The others were likely out patrolling the forest, or at the archery range for a little torchlight target practice, or maybe gathering berries from the bushes to the north. They'd return soon, though — once they got hungry and started smelling the stew.

Luckily, the fire was still blazing in its pit, and Robin laid Marian down beside it, as close as he dared without risking her being burned. Then he scooped up a pile of leaves to make a pillow for her head and draped his cloak across her body like a blanket. Not exactly proper accommodations for a noble lady, but it was the best he could do on short notice.

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'Marian,' he whispered. 'Can you hear me?'

For a moment, she didn't stir. Then, slowly, her eyes fluttered open. She squinted, looking around in confusion. 'Where am I?' she asked, sounding a little frightened. She struggled to sit up. Robin laid a paw on her arm.

'It's all right,' he whispered. 'You're safe.'

She looked up at him, her eyes widening. 'So it wasn't a dream,' she murmured, her voice filled with wonder. 'You're really here.'

'And so are you, it seems,' Robin replied, trying to keep his voice light. Marian shivered again, and he adjusted his cloak over her shoulders and

placed his hat on her head to help keep in her body heat. It was one of the things Richard had taught him to do on cold nights during the war.

‘Thank you,’ she said softly, clutching the cloak in her paws. ‘You saved my life.’

Robin waved her off. ‘Bah! The least I could do for an old friend.’

Even as the words left his mouth, he cringed. Old friend? But she was so much more than that! She had been his *everything* before the war. *Everything*.

But that was along time ago, he scolded himself. And he was no longer that noble fox, smitten by a girl of the court. He was an outlaw. And she’d do best to know that and stay clear. No good could come out of her cavorting with the likes of him and his men.

‘Sorry about chasing you,’ Little John broke in, probably sensing the awkwardness in the air. ‘We’re a bit wary of strangers here in these woods, as you can imagine. But if I had known who you were...’ He glanced at Robin and shrugged.

‘I understand,’ she said. ‘I was traipsing through the woods at night. I would be suspicious of me too.’

‘I’m John, by the way,’ Little John added. ‘Second-in-command of this here motley crew. With Robin being our fearless leader, of course.’

Marian smiled at him. ‘It’s nice to meet you, John.’ She looked around. ‘There are more of you?’

‘Oh, yes. I’m sure they’ll be back shortly. And they’re going to be so excited to meet you!’ John added with a grin. ‘After all, they’ve heard so much about—’

‘Marian, what are you doing here?’ Robin interrupted quickly. Marian didn’t need to know how famous she was among his friends. ‘Why were you wandering alone in the forest at night?’

She looked bashful. 'I was searching for you,' she admitted. 'I went to your house first. There were vultures there, picking the place apart.' She made a face. 'They tried to tell me you were a traitor to the crown.'

'Please!' John scoffed, waving a paw. 'Robin has no

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quarrel with the crown.' He winked at his friend. 'Only with the lion who's been wearing it.'

Robin laughed. It was a common joke between them. 'Hey, don't you start talking about his royal phoniness like that,' he shot back playfully, as was their routine. 'You might force him to start sucking his thumb and begging for his mum my!'

'Mummy!' John whined, mimicking the thumb-sucking.
'Oh, Mummy!'

Marian giggled at the impersonation. Then her smile faded. 'But it's not funny, really, is it?' she said, looking from John to Robin, her eyes wide and serious. 'What's going on, I mean. I haven't been home long, but what I've seen of my uncle's kingdom . . Her voice trailed off, and she looked distraught.

Robin sighed deeply, realising how he and John must sound to her. They'd gotten so used to flippant answers and jests over the past months, mostly because it hurt too much to accept the dire truth of their situation. But this was Marian—not some stranger he'd just met. She'd always seen right through his bravado, straight into his naked heart.

'I'm sorry,' he said, lowering his eyes. 'But sometimes you have to laugh. To keep your sanity, you know?'

‘What happened, Robin?’ she asked. ‘Why are you an outlaw?’

He hung his head. And there it was: the question he’d been dreading since she’d woken up. She deserved to have an answer—as much as he didn’t want to give one.

‘Let’s just say the new king and I don’t exactly see eye to eye,’ he said. He felt John’s eyes on him but refused to look at his friend. ‘And he has decided my presence at court is no longer to his liking.’

Suddenly he found himself wishing she’d never come looking for him. It was selfish, he knew. But if she had just stayed away, perhaps he could have forgotten her—and moved on with his new life, such as it was. But having her here, sitting beside him, wrapped in his cloak, demanding honest answers—it made him both angry and terribly sad.

Because once she learned the truth, she’d never want to look at him again.

‘What about your parents?’ she pressed.

‘They fled abroad more than a year ago, when things started going bad in the kingdom. I think they saw the writing on the wall. Thankfully, they had the means to do so. So many do not.’

‘And you didn’t want to join them?’

He shrugged. ‘Let’s just say I have . . . responsibilities here. I made a promise to my king. And I cannot go back on it now.’

She nodded slowly. He waited for her to ask more questions, but she seemed to sense his reluctance to talk. She had always been good at that, his Marian, sometimes seeming to understand him better than he understood himself.

He cleared his throat, desperately needing to defuse the tension in the night air. ‘Wow, it’s getting late!’ he exclaimed. ‘Perhaps we ought to get

you home.'

Marian frowned. 'But I just got here.'

'Yes, indeed you did,' he agreed, running his paw through his fur. His mind raced for excuses. 'But what if they're looking for you back at the castle? I don't want you to get in any trouble on my account.'

This time it was Marian's turn to grin. 'Oh, Robin!' she teased. 'Getting in trouble on your account is my specialty, or don't you remember from when we were kids?' She batted her eyelashes at him playfully, and something inside him stirred.

Oh, he remembered all right—all those nights he'd tempted her to sneak out of the castle to stomp through the mud or dance under the moon. No matter what wild scheme he'd concocted, Marian was always up for it. It was one of the things he loved most about her: her mischievous delight at misbehaving and putting one over on her elders.

But it was one thing to traipse mud through a castle or stay out past your bedtime, quite another to cavort with outlaws and incur the wrath of a new king, drunk with power.

'Unfortunately, things have changed since we were children,' he said slowly. 'And the danger is real. Prince John has a fondness for punishing anyone who dares disobey him. And no-one is immune, even those of noble rank? He gave her a pleading look. 'Marian, I couldn't bear to know you were punished on my account?'

'I appreciate your concern,' she said, her voice even. 'But I'm a grown fox. I've made my own way for years now, and I'm not going to suddenly stop on account of a new king who can't even keep his crown on his head?'

Her eyes twinkled with mischief, causing Robin to laugh out loud. He couldn't help it. She'd always made him laugh.

Before he could reply, his ears caught the sound of a flute—the signal that the others were returning to camp. He shot a glance at John. What were they going to think when they found an unexpected visitor by the fire?

He guessed he was about to find out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Robin watched as his friends burst into the clearing, talking and laughing and joking about how hungry they were— declaring the stew had better be ready. They were, as always, a boisterous lot, and he hoped they wouldn't offend Marian with their less-than-courtly manners. They certainly weren't used to being in the company of fine ladies. In fact, for most of them it had been months since they'd set their eyes on a female face.

Leading the motley crew was Allan-a-Dale, the rooster musician who used to travel the land, singing songs in the taverns for coins.

Unfortunately, during his last performance, *he'd* chosen to sing a bawdy tune about the phony king of England, which had been a great hit with the locals—until

the sheriff and his rhino henchmen happened to wander by and overhear it. Let's just say they weren't exactly fans of the lyrics and—well, in the end, Allan was barely able to escape with his life. When Robin found out, he invited the rooster to camp, where everyone was sure to appreciate his music, no matter what he decided to sing about.

In fact, it was one of Allan's songs that had dubbed Robin's group of outlaws the Merry Men—even though it was about as big a misnomer as "Little" John was. In addition there were few in the group who could actually be considered merry on a regular basis—not surprising, really, considering each had a price on his head and was forced to live away from his family. Not to mention the whole sleeping arrangement in the forest. After all, it was tough to wake up merry after a night on the ground with rocks digging into your back.

But somehow the name had stuck, all the same. And Allan-a-Dale had since composed many a song about Robin Hood (Robin's longtime nickname due to his always wearing his green hooded cloak) and his Merry Men, which he'd sing each night after dinner to much enthusiasm and cheering.

Behind Allan limped Otto, an old hound dog who had once worked as a blacksmith in Nottingham. Otto had been injured on the job when a hammer came down and crushed his foot. He hadn't been able to work after that and soon fell behind on his taxes, which left him with two choices: go to jail or try his luck in the forest.

Rounding out the crew was Much, the miller's son, a turtle who had served with Robin in the war; Father Rabbit, who had been outlawed after stealing a bushel of carrots to feed his large family; and Will Scarlet, a smooth-talking cat who had gotten caught fishing in the castle moat. That might not have been an offense worth

outlawing had he not, once caught, shoved five fish down his gullet before spitting out the bones in Prince John's face. Robin was still regretful he'd missed that particular moment.

'Greetings, lads,' Robin said with a lazy wave, though inside, his nerves were taut. How were they going to react when they saw Marian? 'How is it with you this fine evening?'

'Very well, sir!' Allan exclaimed, prancing into the camp with his beloved lute strapped to his back. 'And we bring news! You'll never guess who's returned to—'

He stopped short—so short, in fact, that the other animals slammed into him from behind, causing them all to flail and fall, tumbling to the ground in a tangle of limbs and paws, squawking and squeaking as they dropped. Robin groaned, glancing over at Littlejohn.

'Actually, I believe I *could* wager a guess,' he said wryly.

He watched warily as, one by one, the animals righted themselves. As they did, they craned their necks to see what had made Allan stop—or *who*.

Marian raised a paw, smiling shyly. 'Hello, boys,' she said.

Their mouths opened. Their eyes grew wide. For a moment no-one seemed capable of words. Robin supposed he couldn't blame them. He too had been speechless when he'd first seen Marian.

Will Scarlet seemed to come out of his trance first. He stepped closer, peering at Marian with green eyes that glowed in the firelight. 'As I live and breathe,' he declared. 'You're a girl!'

Little John rolled his eyes. 'Very observant, Will, as always.'

Marian laughed, rising to her feet, still clutching Robin's cloak around her. 'My name is Marian,' she said. Her eyes went from Will to

the rest of the crew. She smiled. 'I'm an old friend of Robin's.'

The camp erupted into murmurs. Suddenly everyone seemed to have found their voices at once. Of course Robin couldn't really blame them. Marian was a bit of a legend around these parts, thanks to his being quite unable to stop reminiscing about their old friendship on lonely nights by the fire. Allan-a-Dale had even taken it upon himself to

write a song about the two of them—a song Robin fervently hoped he wouldn't decide to break out now.

The animals crowded around Marian, asking all sorts of questions but not giving her a moment to answer any of them. Robin pushed his way through the throng to protect his friend, waving the others back.

‘Give her space!’ he declared. ‘Or she’s going to think you were all born in a barn.’

‘To be fair, I *was* born in a barn,’ Father Rabbit said sheepishly. ‘If that makes a difference.’

Robin sighed. ‘Look, Lady Marian is going to be our guest tonight for dinner. Then she will return to her home. And don’t worry!’ he added quickly, catching a few doubtful expressions. ‘I will blindfold her so she cannot find her way back on her own.’ He gave the vixen an apologetic look. ‘Sorry,’ he added. ‘It’s just a rule we have here. For safety, you know?’

‘I completely understand,’ Marian assured him. Then she turned to the others, walking up to each of them and greeting them in turn. They were far from the creatures she would typically associate with as a lady of the court—largely unsophisticated, rough around the edges and a bit smelly. But Marian treated them as if they were her personal invitees to a grand ball. And all came away practically blushing under their fur or shell.

Robin watched the exchanges from a short distance, feeling his heart grow uncomfortably warm as she sympathised with Otto's hurt foot and complimented Much on his armour—had he really made it himself? She was kind. She was sweet. She was respectful.

She was everything he had ever loved about her three years before. She hadn't changed a bit. Except perhaps she was even more beautiful now—and that was saying something. He sighed dreamily, sinking down onto a nearby log, half in a daze.

Thwap! He looked up, startled, as a paw was playfully tapped on the back of his head. Little John stood behind him, a knowing look on his furry face. 'Come on, lover boy,' the bear teased. 'If you're done dreamin', it's our night to serve the stew.'

Oh. Right. Robin shook himself, embarrassed. He followed John over to the pot simmering on the fire and began handing out hearty bowls of root stew to the group. As Marian took her bowl, he felt a moment of worry that a lady like herself shouldn't be forced to eat such a primitive forest meal. But Marian took a huge bite of her stew and smiled widely, singing its praises and demanding that Little John share his recipe, which made the old bear glow with pride.

After they had all been served, Marian set down her

bowl and leaned in to address the group. 'Thank you for your hospitality,' she said sincerely. 'I'm really sorry to have intruded on your evening unannounced.'

'It's quite all right,' Allan-a-Dale assured her. 'After all, we never get the pleasure of company here.'

'Especially of one as lovely as you,' Will Scarlet added with a flirty grin. Robin shot him an annoyed look.

Marian closed her eyes, as if bashful. Then she opened them again. 'Can I ask you something?' she said. 'Are you all outlaws here? Like Robin? Wanted by Prince John?'

'Aye, m'lady,' said Much. 'We all have different stories, hut we're all wanted by the law.'

'But not criminals!' added Father Rabbit hastily. 'Well, unless you consider it a crime to feed one's family.'

Marian frowned. 'I certainly do not,' she assured him. Then she took a closer look at the rabbit. 'Do you have children in the village?' she asked. 'A little daughter, perhaps? Named Tagalong?'

Father Rabbit nodded slowly, tears welling in his eyes. '*That's* my youngest,' he replied. His pink nose twitched. 'Have you met her? Have you seen her mother? Do you know if they're well?'

'I saw them this morning while travelling through town,' Marian told him. 'I won't lie to you—they did not seem to be doing well. I did manage to give them a carrot

from my bag and told them" to come to me if they needed anything else.'

'Ah. Well, the missus won't do that,' Father Rabbit said with a bitter laugh. 'She's far too proud to accept charity. But if you don't mind keeping an eye out for them, I'd be forever grateful.' He looked around the camp. 'Sometimes I just feel so helpless, living here. Knowing they're suffering and not being able to do anything about it.'

Robin gave him a rueful look. 'I know, mate,' he said. 'It's been hard on all of us. But you know your family wouldn't want you to risk your life on their account.' He turned to Marian. 'Prince John has made it clear. We are not welcome in his kingdom. At least not if we want to keep our heads on our shoulders.'

Marian's eyes shone with pity as she gazed upon the group. And suddenly Robin felt his hackles rise, despite his best efforts. He didn't like the idea of her feeling bad for him—or any of them, for that matter, not after he'd worked so hard to give these men a decent life when everything was taken from them. It could have been so much worse.

But she clearly didn't understand.

'So you're just stuck out here?' she asked after a pause. 'Forever?'

For a moment, no-one spoke. The tension in the air was so thick you could have cut it with a knife. Robin squirmed

■ in his seat, feeling all eyes on him. What was he supposed to say, when she put it like that?

Suddenly Littlejohn broke in: 'Why, you make it sound like a prison, m'lady!' he declared, rising to his feet and putting on his cockiest air. 'But you couldn't be more wrong. In fact, to us, the forest is a little slice of heaven. We have freedom, we have food and we have each other for companionship and safety. Why, we even have

our own court musician,' he added, clapping his paws at Allan-a-Dale, who had just finished his stew. 'Come on then, Allan! Give us a tune, won't you? Let's show Maid Marian just how merry the forest can be!'

Allan obediently rose to his feet, strumming his lute. After a few adjustments, he launched into a lively, impromptu tune, highlighting the loveliness of the forest. The other men quickly picked up on the lyrics and a few got up to dance by the fire. Marian smiled and joined in, clapping her paws dutifully to the beat for a bit. But Robin noticed that the troubled look never completely left her face.

When the song finished, she rose to her feet. All eyes went immediately to her. 'That was lovely,' she said. 'And it does seem you've built yourselves quite the life out here. I'm impressed. I really am. But what about everyone else? They're still back there, suffering under Prince John's rule.' The smiles faded all around. Several animals shifted uncomfortably in their seats, not meeting Marian's eyes. Robin sighed deeply.

'We're not oblivious to what's going on,' he said softly. 'Unfortunately, it doesn't matter much in the end. Our king is dead, and like it or not, Prince John is the rightful heir to the throne and will rule as he will. And there's nothing a few outlaws can do about it.'

'That's not true!' Marian blurted out, her eyes flashing fire. Her gaze swept the camp. 'I refuse to believe there's no hope at all. I mean, what if we banded together? There's strength in numbers, right? What if we were to find a way to take him down? To save the kingdom!'

For a moment, everyone was quiet. Then Will Scarlet started to chuckle. Softly, at first, then growing in volume. A few others

joined in, one by one, until the entire camp had erupted into laughter.

‘What’s so funny?’ Marian demanded, planting her paws on her hips.

‘Sorry!’ cried Much, trying to contain himself. ‘It’s just—that’s a joke, right?’

‘Imagine us lot—going against the prince’s army!’ added Otto, pointing to his broken foot. ‘Why, I’m sure he’d be shaking in his boots to see me limping after him!’

The laughter grew louder, harsher. Some of them slapped their legs in mirth, while others held their tummies.

Marian's face crumpled, and Robin cringed from the sidelines, riot knowing what to do—or say. These were his men—and they weren't wrong. Seven vagabonds and one noble lady didn't stand a chance of taking down a king. It was preposterous and would only get them all killed.

So why did he still feel so guilty when he looked upon Marian's face?

He rose to his feet and walked towards his old friend. When he reached her, he placed a soft paw on her shoulder. 'Marian,' he tried.

She jerked away, whirling to face him. Her eyes were shiny and filled with a mixture of rage and tears.

'Laugh all you like,' she growled. 'But I refuse to sit around and watch my uncle's kingdom be destroyed. I will do something—even if I have to do it myself.'

And with that, she stormed out of the camp and into the darkness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Marian didn't get far before she felt a paw on her shoulder. She whirled around, not surprised to see Robin, silhouetted in the moonlight. His face was grave, his eyes filled with apology. At least he wasn't laughing at her like the rest of them.

She bit her lower lip, her body trembling with anger— part of it aimed at herself. What had she been hoping for, anyway? She'd just met them and, what, she expected them to drop everything and sign up for a revolution? When she didn't even have a plan herself? But still... it hurt, to stand there and be laughed at like that.

Robin reached out, cupping her face with his paw. He met her eyes with his own, his pupils swimming with regret.

'I'm so sorry,' he said softly. 'My men are good-hearted folk. But sometimes they lack basic manners.'

Part of her wanted to push him away, to turn and flee into the forest. But he seemed so sincere. It made her heart hurt. How many times had she looked into his eyes over the years? They had always filled her with such comfort. But now she felt only an aching chasm of regret.

Oh, Robin, she thought. Will it ever be like it once was?

She sighed deeply. 'They weren't wrong,' she assured him. 'Of course the eight of us wouldn't be able to take down a kingdom. It takes armies to do that. And even then, it's nigh impossible.' She wrinkled her snout. 'But I can't help at! I just feel so helpless right now. To see my uncle's subjects suffering like this. And then to be told there's nothing we can do to stop it—that it's just going to go on like this forever?'

‘I know,’ Robin said quietly. ‘Believe me, I feel the same. I hate being forced to hide away like this in the forest, knowing others are suffering.’

‘Then help me!’ she blurted out before she could stop herself. ‘Even if the others won’t. It could be you and me— side by side, stirring things up—just like the old days!’

She held her breath. And there it was: her plea, laid bare in front of him. Whatever he said next, she knew, would change everything between them—forever.

Please, Robin, she thought, feeling the tears well in her eyes.

For a moment, he said nothing—just stared at the ground, as if it held all the answers. And suddenly she realised she knew exactly what he would say, even before he was able to say it.

And something inside of her died.

‘Well, then,’ she managed to croak out. She started to turn. But Robin grabbed her before she could step away, pulling her around to face him again. His face was contorted with grief.

‘Marian, I want to help you. More than you can ever imagine. But please, try to understand. I made a vow to those men back there. I promised to lead them and keep them and their families safe. They’re all wanted criminals under Prince John’s rule. And the sheriff would love nothing more than the chance to arrest them and throw them into the castle dungeons. Or worse— an excuse to retaliate by targeting their families back in Nottingham. Their children, even.’

Marian winced, her mind flashing to little Tagalong. ‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ she admitted softly.

‘Of course you hadn’t. You’re too good and kind- hearted and ready to stick your neck out for the others. But, UHjBi I can assure you the animals you met tonight are

not cowards, hiding out from their responsibilities. They're brave souls who have already given up everything in the desperate hope of protecting their loved ones.'

Marian nodded slowly. What Robin was saying—well, it made sense. But at the same time, it did nothing to soothe her frustration. If no-one was able to stand up for what was right, then the wrongs would continue indefinitely. And nothing would ever change.

No. She squared her shoulders. She wouldn't let that happen. Robin and his men might not be able to help her. But that didn't leave her helpless. She was her uncle's niece, after all. And he had never backed down from a bully.

'I understand,' she said. 'But understand this. I *will* find a way to help my king's subjects. Even if I am forced to do it all by myself.'

Robin's mouth quirked into a sad smile. He gazed at her with eyes brimming with emotion. 'I wouldn't expect anything else from my Marian,' he whispered, his voice rough.

For a moment, they just looked at each other—looked and looked as the world seemed to fall away around them. For that one moment there was no Prince John. No Sir Hiss. No hungry rabbits and turtles in town. Just two best friends who had been through so much together, standing side by side once again.

At last Marian forced herself to turn away. 'I have to go,' she whispered, hardly daring to speak.. 'Before I'm missed.'

Robin startled, as if woken from a deep slumber. Then he nodded slowly. 'Of course,' he said. 'I'll escort you out.' He started down the trail.

'Don't I . . . need a blindfold?' she asked hesitantly. 'You said . . .'

Robin shrugged. 'I trust you,' he said softly. 'And I need you to remember how to get back here. Just in case . . .'

He didn't finish his sentence, but he didn't have to. She could see the concern written on his face and knew it wasn't unwarranted. If she was determined to play this dangerous game, she might soon find herself as outlawed as the rest of them.

'All right,' she said. 'Lead the way.'

She fell into step behind him, and together they made their way through the dark forest. As they walked, Robin pointed out various markers that most would have walked right by. 'Follow these markers,' he told her, 'and you will end up at our camp.' He also taught her a special whistle to let the others know she was a friend, not a foe. And he explained all about the ghosts of Sherwood Forest, which were not ghosts at all but rather haunting sounds made by the wind blowing through the trees.

Too soon they reached the edge of the forest, the road back to the castle lit by a bright full moon while a field of stars twinkled in the sky. Robin turned to Marian, giving her a small bow.

‘I dare not go any farther,’ he said. ‘I hope you can find your way from here.’

‘Yes,’ she assured him. ‘I’ll be fine. I know where I am.’ She reached up to unclasp the green cloak she still wore. ‘I need to give this back to you,’ she said. ‘And your hat.’

But Robin waved her off. ‘No need,’ he said. ‘I’d rather you keep them. The night is still crisp. I don’t want you to be cold.’

She considered arguing with him but in the end only nodded. For she *was* cold. And the cloak was warm and smelled like the forest, like Robin himself. And she found she couldn’t bear to part with it. She’d already lost too much that night. She would keep this. She would wear it and think of what could have been—in another time, in another world.

‘I need to go,’ she rasped. ‘Take care of yourself, Robin. And your men.’

He nodded stiffly. ‘You too,’ he said. ‘And, Marian, please be careful,’ he added in a rush. ‘I couldn’t bear it if something were to happen to you.’

‘Don’t worry,’ she replied, remembering the last time they’d had this conversation—under the old apple tree in the castle garden what felt like many years before, when she was young and innocent and still believed in happy endings. ‘I’ll have the enemy shaking in their boots,’ she quipped. And even though she felt like crying, she forced a grin to her face.

Robin gave her a sad smile. ‘I’m sure you will,’ he said.

‘But promise me you’ll be careful all the same.’

‘I promise,’ she whispered, and then forced herself to take that first step. To walk away. Down the road, towards the castle. Not allowing herself to turn around to see if he was still watching from the forest’s edge. Because

she knew, deep in her heart, if she found that he was, she would not be able to leave his side again—even if it meant giving up everything.

But she couldn't be selfish, she reminded herself. The animals needed her. And she was the only one left who could help.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Robin watched Marian go, his heart feeling as if it were being torn from his chest. Half of him wanted to run after her—tell her he was sorry, that he'd do anything she wanted as long as she didn't leave. But in the end, he forced his feet to stay planted firmly on the ground. Because what she was asking for was too much. He could not be selfish. He could

not burn down everything he'd built in the forest.

As much as he might want to ... for her.

He shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, her accusations running through his head. He knew she wasn't wrong. Things *were* bad in England. It was easy to forget that, hiding out in the forest each day. But he knew, deep down, how bad it must be for the animals living under Prince John's cruel command. And it would likely only get worse as time went on.

But this wasn't like the war they'd fought in the north, where the rightful line of succession was being threatened. In England, there were no challengers with a valid claim to the throne, which meant there was no other side to fight for. And even if Marian were to manage to stir up some kind of revolution, how could she possibly win? Prince John had a castle, an army and endless amounts of gold. No-one could stand up to that. Any hint of unrest would be quickly squashed.

And those who sparked that unrest would pay with their lives.

'Are you all right, Robby?'

Robin turned to find Little John coming through the trees, concern written on his furry face. The bear must have left camp to look for him when he failed to come back after finding Marian. He was a good friend, Little John. Robin was lucky to have him.

He forced a lazy smile to his face and waved to the bear as if nothing were amiss. The last thing he needed was for Littlejohn or the other Merry Men to see how shaken up he was over Marian's visit. They saw him as their fearless leader and depended on his steadfastness. He couldn't let them know how close he'd just come to completely falling apart.

'Why, I'm as fit as a fiddle, Johnny!' he declared, leaving the forest's edge to head towards his friend. 'Or I will be, anyway, as soon as I get myself a second helping of your delicious stew. I have to say, all this rescuing of damsels in distress makes for one famished fox.'

Little John crinkled his eyes worriedly. 'Is our . . . damsel . . . all right?' he asked, looking around as if half expecting to find Marian hiding in the bushes.

'She's fine,' Robin assured him. 'I lead her out of the forest, and she's probably halfway back to the castle by now.' He left out the part about deciding not to blindfold her. He trusted Marian, but he knew the others might worry.

'Well, that's good, I suppose,' Little John replied. 'I'd hate for anything to happen to her. And I'm sorry the men started laughing. Once you left, I gave them a good talking to. They won't laugh again, I assure you.'

Robin gave him a rueful smile. 'Thank you,' he said. 'But I don't think it'll matter. I doubt we'll be seeing her much from now on.' He felt Little John's pitying gaze. 'Which is for the best,' he added-quickly. 'Now come on. Let's get back before the others eat all my stew.'

/Together they headed through the forest. When they

• *arrived at the camp, everyone was still sitting around the fire but no-one was talking much. And there was no cheery I music from Allan-a-Dale to lighten the mood. Instead, they ‘were all staring into the fire with troubled looks on their Mt faces. She’d gotten to them, Robin realised, despite their initial laughter—just as she’d gotten to him.*

‘Is everything all right?’ asked Much gruffly when he ‘saw Robin.

‘Did the lady get home safely?’ added Allan, to his f credit, looking concerned.

‘Are you sure she won’t inform the sheriff of our location?’ Will Scarlet piped up. ‘Perhaps it would be wise to move camp—just in case.’

Murmurs rose from the others. It seemed Will was not the only one with this concern. Robin sighed, then clapped his paws to get their attention.

‘Everything is fine,’ he declared with a bravado he hoped sounded believable. ‘And our location is safe. Lady Marian is a dear friend of mine, and I trust her with my life.’ ‘But the sheriff!’ Much protested.

Robin waved him off with a grin. ‘Please. If you knew Marian, you’d know the sheriff should be afraid of her, not the other way around.’

There was some reluctant laughter at this. And Robin caught a few jokes being made at the sheriff’s expense.

His shoulders dropped in relief. Turning to Allan-a-Dale, he nodded. ‘Now! How about a nice tune to liven up this motley crew!’

‘I think I can manage that.’ The rooster picked up his lute. He strummed the strings for a few moments, then broke out into a well-known, boisterous tavern tune—this time swapping out the regular lyrics for a wild tale of the great Robin Hood and his Merry Men. Soon everyone was

singing along to the chorus and swinging their mugs from side to side, all worries forgotten—at least for the night.

Well, mostly, anyway. Robin grabbed the ladle and helped himself to more stew. But in truth, he wasn't that hungry. And his stomach still churned with the memory of Marian sitting by this very fire, only an hour before. She'd been so close. He could have reached out and pulled her into his arms, fulfilled the promise he'd made her three years earlier—to never part again.

Instead, he'd let her walk away.

But it was for the best, he reminded himself. He couldn't be what she needed him to be. So it was better to let her go. Perhaps in time she'd find another fox—one more suitable for her, a fox who was everything Robin was not, who could give her what she needed.

He wanted that for her—even if the idea broke his heart.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Marian's feet felt heavy as she trudged down the road back towards the castle. It was late, but luckily, the moonlight provided plenty of illumination. She wondered if anyone had noticed she'd been gone—well, besides Kluck, of course. The chicken was likely panicked at this point, wondering what had happened to her.

And the worst part was, it had all been for nothing. She should never have left her chambers, for all the good it had done her.

Oh, Robin. This was not how I imagined it would go between us.. .

For three long years she had pictured their reunion, the first time they'd see each other after the war. In her mind,

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it had always been a joyful event, filled with laughter and jokes and lots of hugging. Best friends, together at last— never to part again.

But nothing could have been further from the reality.

Suddenly she heard a rumbling behind her. She whirled around, surprised to see a familiar coach headed down the road, drawn by two elephants and escorted by four rhino guards. It was the same coach, with the lion crest on its side, that the sheriff had used to pick her up from the docks.

Prince John's coach.

Marian slipped behind a nearby tree, her pulse pounding at her throat. Should she run? Stay hidden? The carriage was coming closer, and she decided it would be better to remain where she was, rather than risk attracting attention by making a move. She tried to peer into the window, to determine who was inside. Was it the sheriff, come back from a nightly tax run? Or maybe Prince John himself? Sir Hiss? What were they doing out there, so late at night? Could they possibly be searching for her? The thought made her stomach sink. What would they do if they caught her out there? Would they lock her back in her room—or worse?

The carriage rolled closer and the window came into view. She caught a flash of gold: Prince John's crown, sitting crookedly on the lion's head. He was dressed for an

occasion, draped in his royal robes, but looked a little sleepy, his thumb firmly planted in his mouth. Beside him sat Sir Hiss, who looked much more awake. As Marian watched, the snake slithered out of the coach's window to bark orders at the elephants, telling them to hurry up.

'Could you possibly go any slower?' the snake demanded. 'It's past His Royal Majesty's bedtime! Chopchop!' Marian could imagine that if the snake had paws, he'd be clapping them along with his orders.

The elephants sighed but dutifully picked up the pace. Meanwhile, Marian let out a breath of relief. So they weren't out looking for her. That was good. And if they had been out all night, visiting, then they probably hadn't even noticed she was gone. She had only to wait for the carriage to pass and then she could be on her way.

But just as they were about to pass her, one of the elephants, in his haste, tripped over a fallen branch he hadn't seen in the darkness. He lurched forwards, his top half before his bottom, causing the carriage to tip dangerously to one side. The other elephant tried to help by leaning the other way. But the carriage was too heavy for him to take its entire weight on his back, and it toppled over, crashing onto the forest floor with a loud bang.

Marian watched, both horrified and fascinated as the elephants tried to untangle themselves from the coach.

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Inside, she could hear Prince John bellowing with rage, which made her giggle a little. Meanwhile, Sir Hiss slid out the window and began scolding the elephants.

•‘You clods!’ he cried. ‘How dare you upset His Royal Majesty!’

‘Help!’ cried Prince John. His voice sounded muffled, and Marian guessed he was still sucking his thumb. ‘Help me, I say! Your king commands it!’

The rhino guards ran to assist, needing to get the elephants back on their feet before they could work to right the coach—which wasn’t easy, considering each elephant had to have weighed a ton. Marian watched, not able to help a small smile, as they started arguing with one another, which only made things worse.

She knew she should slip away—take advantage of everyone’s being distracted. She could beat them back to the castle, slip through the secret passageway and return to her rooms before anyone was the wiser. But just as she was about to make her move, her eyes fell on something lying on the ground at the back of the carriage.

Gold.

The carriage, it seemed, had been carrying a large chest of gold positioned on its rear platform. When the carriage had toppled over, the chest had popped open and the gold had spilled out onto the ground. No-one appeared to have

noticed this yet; they were all too busy up front, dealing with the elephants. Marian wondered what Prince John would do if he knew his precious treasure was just lying in the road, ripe for the taking.

The taking...

Suddenly a thought struck her. A wild thought. A dangerous thought. A thought that she definitely shouldn't have been thinking. Yet it seemed to lodge in her brain, and she found she couldn't shake it free.

The gold was just sitting there, after all.

It would be so simple: slip out onto the road and fill her cloak with gold when no-one was looking, then go straight to the village and give it back to those from whom it had been stolen. For it *had* been stolen, she reminded herself, under the guise of taxes. This gold belonged to the animals.

And the animals needed it far more than Prince John did.

Granted, it wasn't going to right all the wrongs in the land. Gold would go only so far. It couldn't change laws or free those who had been imprisoned. But it could provide some relief in the meantime, while she worked to come up with more permanent change. It could buy food, medicine- fill empty bellies, cure those who were sick.

It could save lives.

Her eyes turned back to the commotion at the front of

the carriage. The rhinos had managed to help the first elephant back to his feet and were aiding the second. Prince John had somehow managed to crawl out of the carriage and was ordering everyone around, which was just causing more confusion. Everyone was occupied. No-one was looking. If she was going to do this—she needed to do it now.

For a moment, she almost reconsidered. If she was caught, she knew there would be no second chance. She'd be deemed a traitor like Robin—and a thief. She'd lose all her privilege and be thrown into prison and probably never be let out. Which meant any opportunity to help the kingdom would be gone forever.

Maybe she should play it safe—bide her time, find another way.

But then little Tagalong's face rose to her mind—her big hungry eyes. And Marian knew her choice had already been made.

After pulling Robin's cap low over her face, she slunk out from behind the tree and tiptoed towards the pile of spilled gold. When she reached b, she started scooping up as much as she could, as fast as she could do it, using Robin's cloak as a basket. Her heart was pounding, and she barely allowed herself to breathe. Any moment someone could turn around and see her. And then she'd have to run.

M A R I M A N C U S I

She'd almost finished When she heard a sudden voice above her.

'What's going on here? Who are you? What are you doing?'

She jerked her head up only to find Sir Hiss peering through the back carriage window, his beady eyes squinting in her direction. Startled, she yelped in alarm, leaping backwards and managing to trip over a stone. The grip on her cloak loosened and a few gold coins clattered to the ground. The snake's eyes bulged from his head.

'Guards! Guards!' he cried. 'Come quick! We're being robbed!'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Marian bolted back into Sherwood Forest as fast as her feet could carry her—which wasn't as fast as she would have liked, seeing as it was difficult to run while lugging a large pile of gold in your cloak. Behind her, she heard shouts coming from the carriage—Sir Hiss's commands to chase her down—followed by a loud crashing sound as the heavy rhino guards charged through the bushes in pursuit.

She pressed on, heart in her throat, her mind racing with indecision. What was she going to do? She didn't want to drop the gold—not after she'd already risked so much to acquire it. But at the same time, she knew she couldn't go on like this. She was losing too much ground.

Heart racing, her eyes darted around the forest, looking

for something—anything—that could serve as a hiding spot. She was about to give up when she spotted a gnarly old oak tree with a rotted-out hole in its trunk, just ahead. It wasn't perfect, but it might serve. Quickly, she ran over to it and dumped the gold into the hole, then threw some dead leaves on top of it before taking off in the other direction, now able to increase her speed.

She dashed through the woods, trying to keep track of each twist and turn. She didn't want to succeed in losing the guards only to find herself lost in the forest. Straining to listen, she realised she could no longer hear them behind her. Maybe she was all right. She allowed herself to slow her pace, sucking in much-needed breaths as she stepped into a clearing. Her side hurt from running and her vision was a little spotty. She glanced behind her. Had she managed to outrun them? Was she actually safe?

Suddenly she heard a noise. She whirled around, horrified to realise two rhinos had entered the clearing. They were brandishing sharp-looking spears. She tried to back away only to find two more emerging behind her, the four of them effectively surrounding her on all sides. She cried out in dismay. This was not good, not good at all.

The rhinos stepped closer, lowering their spears so the sharp ends pointed towards her. 'Stop in the name of Prince John!' one of them barked. 'Or we will run you through!'

Marian's shoulders slumped in defeat. So much for escaping. She was trapped, outnumbered and without a weapon. The best she could hope for was to try to talk her way out of this. And that didn't leave her with much hope at all.

'Easy, boys,' she began, her voice still shaking. 'There must be some mistake. I was just out for a stroll. I mean you no—'

The lead rhino grunted loudly, cutting her off. He motioned for the others to close in. She squeaked in alarm, holding up her paws in surrender, her life flashing before her eyes. What were they going to do? Would they simply end her? Or would they wait for Prince John and Sir Hiss to arrive to pass the sentence? Her mind went back to Robin and the promise she'd made to him to be careful. What would he think when he learned of her fate?

Oh, Robin, she thought miserably. *Perhaps you were right all along...*

But just as she was about to accept her lot, a loud screeching sound pierced the night air. The rhinos turned, surprised, just in time to see a dark cloaked figure enter the clearing. The lead rhino turned to face the newcomer, holding out his spear. But the figure drew a sharp-looking sword from their belt, slashing at the spear and easily knocking it out of the rhino's grip. The rhino bellowed in rage, charging at the figure with full force, and Marian was afraid he'd flatten them.

But just before he reached the stranger, they ducked down, sweeping out a leg and slamming it into the rhino's.

With a scream, the rhino toppled over, falling directly into the second guard, who was right behind him, and who ended up doing the same to the third. One by one the rhinos fell into one another, their spears clattering to the forest floor.

A moment later, Marian felt a shadow cross over her. She looked up to find the figure looming above. 'Come on, dearie,' they said, holding out a wing. 'Let's get you out of here.'

Marian gaped. 'Lady Kluck?' she whispered, shocked beyond belief.

The figure reached for her hood, pulling it back to reveal her beak—just for a moment, but it was enough for Marian to recognise her. Lady Kluck—her own nursemaid, Lady Kluck—had somehow just taken out Prince John's guards.

Her eyes caught movement behind her. The rhinos were scrambling to their feet, grabbing their spears. They didn't have much time. She grabbed Kluck's wing and allowed her lady-in-waiting to pull her up. Then the two of them sprinted back into the forest. Behind her, she could hear Prince John screaming at his men, demanding to know how they could have let her get away.

'Come on,' Kluck urged. 'We need to find a place to hide.'

She followed her attendant back out of the forest and through a grassy field. Before long, they came to a small barn cut into the side of a hill. Kluck ran to the barn door, yanked it open and ushered Marian inside. Once they were both in, the chicken slammed the door closed and locked it behind her. Then she leaned over, wings on her legs, her breath coming in large gasps.

'Well, that's the most running I've had to do in a while,' she declared, fanning herself with her wing.

Marian nodded, still trying to reclaim her own breath. Once she had, she turned to her attendant, looking at her with wondering eyes. 'Thank you,' she whispered. 'If you hadn't come...' Her voice trailed off. She

didn't want to say what she'd feared. Then she squinted. 'But how did you —'

'Find you?' Kluck suggested. Then she shrugged. 'I got lucky, I suppose. When you didn't return to the castle, I grew worried and came out to look for you.' She scowled. 'And let me tell you, it wasn't exactly a bundle of joy to traipse through that cobweb-filled secret passageway to get out of the castle. If you're going to be using that on a regular basis, we're going to need to do a deep cleaning.'

She sniffed disgustedly, and Marian couldn't help a small giggle as she tried to picture the prim-and-proper Kluck swatting at cobwebs and yelling at spiders as she made her way down the stairs. 'You're lucky you didn't

get lost down there,' she told her lady-in*waiting. 'It can be tricky if you don't know your way.'

'Bah. I have always had a good sense of direction,' Kluck replied. 'I found my way out and went straight to Robin's home, only to learn it was abandoned. At that point I started to get even more worried. I was on my way back to the castle when I heard the commotion.' She gave Marian a knowing look. 'And if I know one thing, it's that if there's commotion, the mischievous Marian and her little feisty fox friend are usually involved.'

Marian felt her shoulders droop at the mention of Robin. Kluck wasn't wrong. Back in the old days Robin had always joined her on her escapades—the wilder, the better.

But that was then, and now she was on her own. Well, until her former nursemaid had made a surprise appearance, that was.

'Thank you for rescuing me,' she said again. Her brow crinkled as she remembered. 'The way you took out those guards! How did you do that?'

Kluck gave her a sly grin. 'Years of training,' she told her. 'Not that I've had to use it much lately. But it does tend to stay with you.'

'What do you mean? What training?' Marian cocked her head in question. 'Since when does a nursemaid undergo combat training?'

‘When she’s not actually a nursemaid?’ Kluck replied with a grin. ‘Or at least not *just* a nursemaid.’ She shrugged. ‘I suppose it’s time you knew. I’m also a knight, trained by King Richard himself long before you came to England as a child.’

‘What?’ Marian stared at her in shock. ‘How did I not know this?’

But even as she said the words, realisation began to fall over her, puzzle pieces coming together in fragmented memories from childhood, of times she’d woken in the middle of the night to find Kluck slipping back into her chambers, covered in dirt and grime. When questioned, her nursemaid would claim that she had been out visiting her country relatives...

Had she actually been serving the realm the whole time?

‘When you first came to the castle as a child, your uncle worried about keeping you safe,’ Kluck explained. ‘He was very busy with matters of the court and needed someone to keep an eye on you at all times. So he assigned me to you, under the guise of a nursemaid, to watch over you and protect you by any means necessary.’ The chicken smiled. ‘I was happy to do it, to serve my king. And over the years, I grew rather fond of you, as well. Even if you were a bit of a mischievous minx,’ she added with a wink.

Marian gave a low whistle. ‘And all this time I thought you were so prim and proper.’

‘And I still am!’ Kluck protested haughtily. ‘You can be both, you know. Proper and deadly? She pulled her sword from her belt and slashed it through the air with one wing while feigning to hold a cup of tea in the other. Marian giggled again.

‘Well, I’m glad you’re on my side,’ she declared. ‘I mean, the way you took out those rhinos! They didn’t even know what hit them!’

‘Please. Those grunts?’ Kluck waved her off. ‘More brawn than brains. Makes it easy? But she looked pleased by the compliment all the same.

A sudden thought came to Marian. ‘Can you teach me?’ she asked. ‘To fight, I mean. Like you?’

Kluck gave her a disapproving look. ‘Now why would you want to do that?’ she asked.

‘So I can take care of myself,’ Marian replied. ‘I mean, you saw me out there. What if the next time, you aren’t around?’

‘Next time?’ Kluck raised an eyebrow. ‘Do you see yourself tangling with Prince John’s guards on a regular basis?’

Marian felt her cheeks heat. ‘Not intentionally. But...’

‘What happened out there, Marian?’ Kluck asked. ‘Why were they after you like that? I know you snuck out of the castle^ but that seems a rather extreme reaction, even for them.’

Marian sighed. ‘It had nothing to do with me leaving the castle,’ she admitted. ‘In fact, I don’t even think they knew it was me. I was disguised the whole time. Only Sir Hiss saw me up close, and you know how snakes have terrible eyesight.’

Kluck clicked her beak. ‘So then what did you do to make them so mad?’ she asked.

Marian stared at the barn floor, wondering if she should make something up, something not quite as bad. But in the end, she decided to come clean. ‘Well, I might have taken a little gold,’ she admitted. ‘From Prince John’s carriage.’

‘What?’ Kluck stared at her, incredulous, not that Marian could blame her. In hindsight, it hadn’t been a move enriched by wisdom. ‘You robbed Prince John?’

‘I didn’t rob him exactly,’ she protested. ‘I just . . . borrowed . . . from someone who could afford it.’ She made a face. ‘Besides, he robbed it from the citizens of Nottingham to begin with. Calling it taxes—but he took far more than his fair share.’ She shrugged. ‘So I thought, well, I’d redistribute things a bit.’

Kluck shook her head in disbelief. ‘Did Robin put you up to this?’ she asked suspiciously. ‘It sounds like one of his harebrained schemes.’

‘No,’ Marian said sadly, once again feeling the ache deep inside at the mention of the outlaw’s name. Lady Kluck **wasn’t wrong to assume either. In the past Robin would have been the first to come up with such a wild plan. But now . » •***

‘He had nothing to do it with it,’ she said. ‘In fact, he made it quite clear he didn’t want to help me at all’ She hung her head, reliving the moment of walking away from her best friend. It still hurt—more than she wanted to admit.

She felt a wing on her arm and looked up to see **Kluck** giving her a sympathetic look. ‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ she said. ‘Though I am sure he had his reasons?’

‘He did. And I get it,’ Marian said, trying not to choke on her words. ‘But all the reasons in the world won’t fill the empty bellies of the citizens of Nottingham?’

She paused, waiting for Kluck to scold her, to tell her she was playing a dangerous game and needed to stop before something worse happened. But to her surprise, the chicken nodded slowly and asked, 'Where is the gold now?'

'I left it in a tree,' Marian said. 'Not far from where you found me. I covered it with leaves. I'm sure no-one's found it. I thought tonight I could sneak back into the forest and retrieve it. Then I could bring it to the village of Nottingham while everyone slept. I'd leave some at every house. And when they wake up in the morning, they'll find it!'

'I see,' Kluck said. 'And if you're caught?'

'Then I'm caught,' Marian replied. 'But at least I will have been caught doing something. Kluck, I can't just sit

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around in the castle, knowing children are going to bed hungry. I have to at least try?

Kluck gave her a rueful look. 'You're right,' she said.

'J am?' Marian held her breath.

'Look, I'm not going to tell you I like it—you putting yourself in danger like this. But how can I, in good conscience, stop you from doing something so selfless and good?' The chicken smiled at Marian. 'It's what your uncle would have wanted?'

Marian felt a warmth rise inside of her at that. King Richard might be dead, but if she could keep his legacy alive—even in a small way...

'Thank you for understanding,' she said. 'It means a lot'

'Oh, I'm not just understanding,' Lady Kluck corrected, a twinkle in her eye. 'I'm helping you do it?'

Hope leapt inside of Marian. 'Really? You'll help me?'

'Richard tasked me with keeping you safe,' Kluck reminded her. 'So I suppose I have no choice in the matter? She winked at Marian. 'Also, I *will* teach you how to fight. If you're going to throw yourself into danger on a regular basis', you might as well be prepared?'

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kluck and Marian waited in the barn for another hour, just to make sure Prince John's men had given up and gone home. To pass the time, Kluck gave Marian her first lesson in combat, which turned out to be less fun than Marian had imagined it would be—and a lot more painful.

‘Stop trying to lunge at me,’ Kluck scolded after easily knocking Marian onto her bottom again. ‘You’re leaving yourself wide open every time you do it.’

Marian made a face while allowing Kluck to pull her back to her feet. ‘But how will I get a blow in if I don’t attack?’ she asked wearily, rubbing her backside.

‘You need to wait for the right moment,’ Kluck explained. ‘Think of it as schoolwork. You know how you

have to study in school before any test? Well, the concept is the same. When you first meet your opponent on the field, you don't know anything about them. Their strengths, their weaknesses. You must study them. How they move. Do they favour their right or left? When they charge in, do they leave a part of themselves unprotected? You must watch and learn, playing defense until you are ready to attack.' Kluck wagged a feather at Marian. 'Patience is so important in the art of combat. Perhaps the most important thing. It's a dance, so to speak. And your opponent is your partner.'

•I suppose that makes sense,' Marian conceded, stepping back into their makeshift ring. She raised a broom—her weapon in this case—while Kluck lifted her own, giving her a challenging smirk. Marian appreciated the fact that her attendant wasn't taking it easy on her. But she knew she was going to be extremely sore the next day if they kept at it much longer.

Still, she wasn't about to give up, not while her pride was on the line.

'Eyes up,' Kluck barked. 'Keep your feet facing me. And breathe!' she added with a scolding look. 'Relax.'

Marian sucked in a long breath, meeting Kluck's eyes with her own. They circled each other slowly, and this time Marian resisted the urge to attack. Instead, she watched Kluck closely, as instructed, trying to learn her moves, to

catch her making a mistake. But Kluck was so good that after a while Marian began to despair. The chicken had no weaknesses as far as Marian could see . . .

Except. . .

She frowned, suddenly noticing something. Every time Kluck feinted to the right, she lifted her left wing, just a little bit. It was almost unnoticeable, and at first Marian wondered if she was just imagining it. But no! There! She did it again, for a moment leaving her underwing completely exposed.

Marian drew in another breath, attempting to keep her expression neutral. The element of surprise was all she had. She circled Kluck slowly, waiting for just the right moment. Then, when Kluck went to the right, Marian charged forwards, driving her broomstick into the chicken's side.

Kluck squawked in surprise, dropping her broom in the process. As she ducked to pick it up, Marian held her own broomstick to her nursemaid's throat.

'Not so fast,' she said, a grin stretching across her face.

Kluck cheered, reaching up and easily swatting the broom away. 'Now that's more like it,' she praised as she climbed back to her feet. 'Maybe we'll make a knight out of you yet.'

Marian raised her broom in triumph as a rush of excitement flowed through her. She twirled around the

barn, feeling almost giddy. ‘And then I’ll teach that nogood, thumb-sucking phony king of England a lesson!’ she declared.

PRINCESS OF THE EVILS

‘Now, now, let’s not get carried away,’ Kluck admonished. ‘It’ll be a long time before you’re ready to lay siege to a kingdom. Still, we’ll start having regular lessons, beginning tomorrow, if that works for you. At the very least, I want you to be able to defend yourself should the need arise.’

Marian turned to face the chicken. ‘Thank you,’ she said, feeling the warmth of gratitude as her eyes fell on her attendant’s face. ‘I’m so glad to have you back in my life. This time as a partner, not just a nursemaid.’

Kluck smiled, placing a wing on Marian’s arm. ‘I feel the same,’ she assured her. Then she clapped her wings. ‘Now, I think that’s enough swordplay for today. You’re going to be black and blue by tomorrow as it is. Besides, I believe we have some gold to deliver?’ Her eyes twinkled.

‘Yes!’ Marian exclaimed, excitement welling inside of her at the thought—mixed with a little fear. ‘Hopefully I can remember where I hid it. And then, once we have it, we can go straight to Nottingham!’

‘How do you plan to distribute it?’ Kluck asked curiously.

Marian thought for a moment. ‘I don’t want to leave it out in the open,’ she said. ‘And I want to make sure everyone

MAKI MANCUSI

gets the same amount. I think the best thing to do would be to slip quietly into each house while they’re asleep and leave a few pieces of gold on every table. Then when they wake up, it’ll be there.’ She grinned, imagining the scene. ‘They’re going to be so surprised.’

‘It sounds like a grand idea,’ Kluck replied. ‘But it’s still risky. And we need to be careful. We don’t know if the sheriff has any guards stationed in town. Or spies. And if we’re spotted . . .’

‘Right.’ Marian wrinkled her nose. Being identified would be a problem. ‘We’ll go disguised,’ she said after a pause. ‘I have Robin’s cloak and hat, and you have your own. We’ll stick to the shadows, keeping our hoods low over our faces the whole time. It’ll be dark too. I think we’ll be all right as long as we’re careful.’

‘I hope so,’ Kluck said. She made a face. ‘Because if anyone does recognise us, well, our good deeds will be over before they’ve truly begun.’

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Retrieving the gold proved more difficult than they'd hoped, and the two of them wasted a good amount of time searching the forest in the dark, trying to locate the tree Marian had stashed it in. At one point, she wondered if they should just give up for the night—and wait until it was light to resume their search. Marian was exhausted, sore and wanted nothing more than to curl up into a ball and sleep for a year. But she forced herself to keep going. Her uncle would not have given up, not when his subjects were suffering.

At last, she found the tree. With a cry of excitement, she called out to Kluck, urging her over. Together, they removed the leaves and gathered the gold into two burlap sacks they'd found in the barn. It wasn't a lot. It wouldn't even make a dent in Prince John's coffers.

But it would mean the world to the citizens of Nottingham.

Once they had secured the gold, they headed down the road, keeping to the shadows until they reached the village. There, everything seemed quiet—no guards patrolling the area, everyone in their homes, hopefully fast asleep. Marian caught smoke curling out of a few chimneys, but other than that, Nottingham was completely still.

'We should separate,' Marian told Kluck, handing her one of the burlap sacks. She pulled her hood lower over her face. 'That way we can cover more ground. The sooner we're finished, the better.'

Lady Kluck nodded in agreement. 'I'll take the east side of town,' she said. 'You take the west. We'll meet by the fountain when we're finished.'

Marian gave her a salute, indicating she was good with the plan, then headed west. She decided to start at the very edge of town and work her way inwards until she met Kluck in the middle. The first cottage was small and run-down, with a few large holes gaping in its thatched roof. Marian shuddered, wondering what they did when it rained. She soon found out as she quietly slipped inside and discovered large wooden buckets positioned under the holes.

"J. ■

The family was asleep on the other side of the room, as far away from the broken sections of roof as possible, all huddled together under one small blanket on an even smaller bed, assumedly to stay as warm as they could in the drafty room. Marian shivered as a gust of wind blew through the cottage, and she hurried to deposit a few pieces of gold on the crude wooden table she found at the room's centre. Then she slipped back outside, pulling the door closed behind her.

Once she had exited, she glanced back at the humble home and sighed. The gold would help in the short term, but it wouldn't be enough to fix a roof. She made a mental note to come back with more at a later date, if she could manage it.

She turned to the next house, repeating what she'd done for the first. Then she moved on to the next. Each family received exactly three gold pieces—to ensure she had enough for everyone. Some families seemed better off than others. But all were decidedly poor and needy. And by the time she made it to the last house, she was feeling a heavy weight on her shoulders and a growing anger inside as she stewed about those responsible. She pictured Prince John, asleep in his warm, cosy bed, a blazing fire in the hearth. He'd wake up to a bountiful breakfast and would probably spend the day counting his gold—while all his subjects went without.

M A R I M A N C U S I

But not this morning, she reminded herself. This morning will be different.

She slipped through the door and into the cottage: a humble home but clean and well-kept. Clearly whoever lived there took pride in what little

they had. The place was also larger than some of the others, with two full rooms, one of which was taken up completely by rows of little wooden beds. Asleep on those beds was a family of bunnies. Marian recognised the first one in a row as Tagalong, curled up under a thin blanket, cuddling her little stuffed rabbit. She was smiling in her sleep, and it made Marian smile too. She wondered what the bunny was dreaming of.

She tiptoed away from the room and walked over to the table. After placing the gold pieces, she prepared to leave. But just as she was about to open the door, she heard a noise behind her. Startled, she turned around, only to find the familiar baby bunny in her nightgown, dragging her stuffed rabbit behind her.

Marian quickly pulled her hood over her face. The last thing she needed was for Tagalong to recognise her and wake the others.

Tagalong took a step forwards, her bunny eyes huge as she stared at Marian.

'Who are you?' she whispered, sounding a little frightened. 'And what are you doing in our house?'

Marian thought quickly. 'I'm a friend,' she assured her.
'I've just come to bring you a gift!'

"A gift for Skippy?" Tagalong asked excitedly, no longer afraid.
'Wow! I was right!'

* 'Skippy?' Marian cocked her head in question.

'My brother, of course,' Tagalong explained, it's his birthday tomorrow. But he said he wasn't getting any presents. 'Cause that mean old sheriff took all our money for taxes. But I told him you always get a present from the Birthday Bunny!' She beamed, looking proud. 'And I was right!'

Marian glanced at the door. She knew she should leave, make her escape before anyone heard Tagalong and woke up. But something kept her feet firmly planted on the floor.

She looked down into her sack. There was one gold piece left.

'Oh, right,' she found herself saying. 'Skippy! Uh, which one is he again?'

'I'll show you!' Tagalong declared delightedly, grabbing her sleeve and leading her into the bedroom and down the rows of cots until they got to a small sleeping boy rabbit at the very end of a row. Marian recognised him as the One who had been playing catch with the turtle when she stopped in Nottingham in the carriage. Had that really been this morning? It already felt like a lifetime ago.

'/This is him?' she asked Tagalong, looking down at him. He was lying under a threadbare blanket that barely covered his body and was shivering a little.

'Yup!' Tagalong exclaimed, so loudly that Marian had to put a paw to the bunny's mouth, begging her to be quiet.

'Shhh,' she cautioned. 'Don't want to wake him and ruin the surprise.'

Tagalong nodded, bouncing up and down excitedly. Marian reached into her sack and pulled out the last gold piece. Carefully, so as not to wake him, she slipped it under his pillow. Then she smiled at Tagalong, motioning for her to follow her back to her own bed. The baby bunny obeyed, hopping up onto the straw mattress. Marian tucked her in, then leaned over, giving her a small kiss on her forehead.

‘Sweet dreams, little one,’ she murmured. ‘And may all those dreams come true.’

When she rose to her feet again, Tagalong was already asleep. She smiled down at her for a moment, then slipped out of the cottage, heading back to the town square. When she arrived, Kluck was waiting for her, her own sack also empty.

‘I think that’s it,’ Marian said. ‘It doesn’t feel like much, having to divide it between so many, but hopefully it’ll hold them over until I can get more.’

* ‘Get more?’ Kluck raised an eyebrow. ‘And how do you suppose you’ll do that?’

‘I don’t know yet,* Marian said. ‘But I’ll figure it out. For now, we’d better get back to the castle. Before someone notices our absence.’

‘You don’t have to tell me twice,’ Kluck replied with a yawn. ‘I could hibernate like a bear at this point.’

The two of them headed out of town, skirting the castle and walking towards the beach, where they entered through the secret tunnel door. This time there were no strange ghost noises coming from the walls on their way through the passage, and they were able to return to Marian’s bedroom with ease* When they got there, everything seemed exactly how they’d left it.

Marian let out a breath of relief. They’d gotten away with it all.

She collapsed onto her four-poster bed, exhausted beyond belief It had been the longest day she’d had in forever, and she couldn’t wait to fall asleep. At the same times she was still quite wound up from the night’s events, and for a moment she just lay there, trying to imagine the looks on the faces of the citizens of Nottingham the next morning when they woke up to the surprises she’d left for them. If only she could have been a fly on the wall. . .

Kluck walked over to the bed and tucked her in. ‘I’m proud of you,’ she declared, stroking Marian’s forehead lovingly. ‘Perhaps that childhood mischievous streak of yours

has finally found its true purpose.’ She grinned wickedly, then rose to her feet and headed to her chambers, leaving Marian alone in the darkness.

Marian smiled to herself, feeling very warm and content. They’d done well that night. And they would continue to do so, for as long as there was need. Maybe they couldn’t overthrow a kingdom singlehandedly. But they *could* make a difference in the everyday lives of the animals of the kingdom. And that was something.

In fact, it was a lot.

CHAPTER TWENTY

‘Wake up, Skippy! Wake up!’

Skippy rolled over in bed, groaning, as his younger sister Tagalong—so nicknamed for her annoying habit of always tagging along on his and their other siblings’ adventures—tugged on his ear.

‘What time is it?’ he grunted. ‘Is it even morning yet?’ He pulled the covers over his head, not much caring if it was. It was his birthday, which usually would have made him jump out of bed at the crack of dawn. His father used to tease him about this, reminding him he hadn’t been born until the afternoon—meaning it wasn’t quite his birthday yet. Perhaps he should make Skippy wait to open his presents and eat his cake.

But this year his father was gone. And there was no money for presents or cake, thanks to the mean old sheriff and his endless taxes. Which gave Skippy little reason to get out of bed. In fact, if possible, he wanted to forget it was his birthday altogether.

But Tagalong would not be deterred. She hopped onto his bed, grabbing his blanket and tearing it away. 'It's birthday time!' she scolded. 'And you'll never guess what the Birthday Bunny brought for you.'

Skippy sighed, rubbing his eyes. He reluctantly sat up in bed. 'Gee whiz, Tagalong. We've gone through this a hundred times,' he moaned. 'There is no Birthday Bunny.' He hated to disappoint her. But it was better for her to face the truth now than be disappointed when her own birthday came along in a couple of months. 'And there are no gifts this year.'

'That's not true!' Tagalong argued, sounding offended by his disbelief. 'I met the Birthday Bunny when he came into our house last night. He was really nice! And he *did* leave you a gift!' She hopped up and down. 'It's under your pillow. Just look!'

Skippy rolled his eyes. He reached for his pillow and lifted it. 'As you can see, Tagalong, there's absolutely nothing—'

He stopped midsentence, his jaw dropping. There *was*

something under his pillow, something small and golden and shiny. Confused, he reached down, scooping it up. ‘What is this?’ he asked, confused. ‘It looks like ...’

His voice trailed off, because he felt foolish even saying J it. Of course it wasn’t that. It wasn’t gold. His mother didn’t even have any gold—just a few farthings and maybe a silver coin on a week when she did extra mending for the neighbours. But gold? That was unheard of.

‘It’s your gift!’ Tagalong exclaimed, looking pleased.

fc. Skippy turned the coin over in his paw, his heart suddenly thudding hard. ‘I don’t understand,’ he whispered.

‘It’s from the Birthday Bunny!’ Tagalong repeated, starting to sound exasperated. ‘I told you! I saw him! He snuck into our house in the middle of the night, wearing a green hood. I couldn’t see his free—or his ears. But I’m sure it was him. Who else would give you a birthday gift?’

Who else indeed? Skippy opened his mouth to speak, but suddenly he heard a scream from the next room. It sounded like their mother. Diving out of bed, he ran past all his brothers and sisters who were still asleep towards the noise. When he entered the cottage’s main room, he found his mother standing over their dining table, a look of sheer disbelief on her face.

‘What is it?’ Skippy asked, a little alarmed.

His mother simply pointed. Skippy followed her paw, his gaze dropping to the three shiny golden objects sitting on the table—shiny golden objects identical to the one he’d found under his pillow.

Gold? Could it really be gold?

‘It’s from the Birthday Bunny!’ exclaimed Tagalong happily. ‘He left presents for all of us! We’re rich! We’re very, very rich!’ She danced around the room until she tripped over her stuffed bunny and went sprawling onto the floor. She wailed, and Mother Rabbit ran over to help her up, shushing her gently as she rubbed her little foot. Meanwhile, Skippy couldn’t stop staring at the coins on the table.

‘Where did they come from?’ he asked.

‘I’m sure I don’t know,’ his mother replied, setting Tagalong back down and joining him at the table. She somehow managed to look both thrilled and frightened at the same time. ‘It doesn’t make any sense.’ r* ‘Maybe Father came and left it for us?’

Skippy looked up to see his older sister^ Sis, peeking around the corner, still dressed in her nightclothes. She hopped over to the table, examining the coins. She brought one to her mouth and bit down on it with her front teeth.

‘Gold,’ she declared. ‘Definitely solid gold.’

‘But where would your father find gold?’ Mother Rabbit asked. Then her mouth dipped into a frown. ‘It has to be stolen,’ she said worriedly. ‘We’ll need to give it back,’

‘Give it back?’ Skippy repeated, horrified. ‘Why would we want to do that?’

He backed up slowly until he felt the wall behind him. Then he took his own coin and slipped it carefully into the small crack by the fireplace that he sometimes used to hide things in. He felt a little guilty doing so. His mother would definitely not approve. But it was his birthday gift, right? And one did not simply give back birthday gifts.

Now all he had to worry about was Tagalong squealing on him.

‘Even if we wanted to return it, we can’t,’ Sis pointed out. She was always the logical one. ‘We don’t know where it came from. And besides, we need it, right? We can use it to buy food and pay our rent? She looked at their mother pleadingly. ‘Right?’

Mother Rabbit pressed her bps together. ‘It is true that we can’t return it unless we find out where it came from. But I also don’t know if it’s right to just spend it? She took a step towards the front door. ‘I’m going to go and talk to the others in the village. See if anyone else got a gift like this.’ She wagged her paw at her kids. ‘The three of you stay here. Do not touch the gold until I get back?’

; And with that warning fresh on her tongue, she opened the cottage door and hopped outside. It swung shut behind her, leaving the three young bunnies alone.

With the gold.

They looked at one another, then at the coins. Sis reached a paw out to touch them, but Tagalong leapt in front of her, blocking her path.

‘You heard Mama,’ she scolded. ‘Don’t touch the gold.’

Sis shot Skippy an exasperated look. There was no bigger rule follower than their baby sister. ‘She didn’t mean that literally,’ Sis told the baby bunny. ‘I can touch it. I just can’t go and buy anything with it.’ She gave a happy sigh. ‘How many carrots do you think we could get with this? Like an entire bunch, right?’

‘More like an entire wagonload,’ Skippy said, thinking about his own gold, hidden in the wall. ‘With another wagon of clover.’

‘Mmm. Clover,’ Tagalong said, clutching her paws *to* her heart. ‘Yummmm.’

Just then there was a knock on the door. The bunnies exchanged worried glances, and Skippy knew what Sis was thinking. Should they hide the gold? But before they could make a move, a familiar voice piped in from the other side of the door.

‘Open up! It’s me! Toby!’

Skippy let out a breath of relief. He hopped to the door and pulled it open, waving his best friend inside before closing it quickly behind him. Toby was moving fast—rather

unusual for a turtle. And he wore a look of excitement on his bespectacled face.

‘Did you hear?’ he asked, pushing his glasses back up over his eyes. ‘The whole town has been gifted with gold!’

‘Wait,’ Skippy interjected. ‘The entire town? Are you serious?’

Toby nodded. ‘I mean, not everyone’s awake yet. But everyone who is found exactly three gold pieces sitting on their tables.’ He pointed to the gold on the bunnies’ table. ‘Isn’t it amazing? Have you ever seen so much gold in your entire life? Why, there must be thirty families in this village. That’s ninety pieces of gold!’

Ninety-one, Skippy thought but didn’t say. This was getting wilder and wilder by the moment.

‘How is this possible?’ Sis asked, shaking her head.

‘The Birthday Bunny works in mysterious ways,’ declared Tagalong solemnly.

‘But it’s not *everyone*’s birthday,’ Skippy reminded her. ‘It’s only mine. So why would everyone be getting presents for *my* birthday?’

Tagalong didn’t have an answer for this. But Toby did. ‘It wasn’t the Birthday Bunny,’ he said. ‘In fact, it wasn’t a bunny at all. It was a fox.’

‘A birthday fox? That’s not a thing,’ Tagalong complained.

Skippy and Sis ignored her, looking at Toby questioningly. ‘How do you know?’ asked Sis. ‘Did you see him?’

Toby gave a smug smile. He enjoyed having news that no-one else did. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘He came late at night. I had been outside, going to the privy, and was on my way back to bed when I saw someone sneaking into our house. At first I was worried. I didn’t have my glasses on, so I couldn’t really see who it was. I was this close to sounding an alarm. But then he turned and I saw his face.’

Skippy swallowed hard. ‘So who was it?’ he asked impatiently. Toby tended to draw out a story far too long for his liking.

Toby grinned widely. ‘It was Robin. Robin Hood!’

‘Robin Hood?’ Sis cried. ‘You mean the fox who rescued our fathers and took them to live in Sherwood Forest?’ She swooned, batting her eyelashes. ‘He’s so handsome.’

Skippy gave her an irritated look before turning back to Toby. ‘Are you sure about that? You said you didn’t have glasses on. Maybe it was just someone who looked like him.’

‘No way.’ Toby shook his head stubbornly. ‘I recognised his hat. It was hidden under his hood, but I could still see it. Remember when he first came home from the war and let us try it on? And no-one has a green cloak like his. With the official crest of his family’s estate embroidered on it.’

PRINCESS OF THIEVES

The turtle crossed his arms in front of his shell. 'It was Robin. I'd bet my life on it.'

'All right, all right,' Skippy said. 'We get it. It was Robin. But why? Why would he bring us gold? And where did he get it from?'

'Do you think our fathers had something to do with it?' asked Sis.

'Probably,' Toby said. 'I'm sure they've been worried about us. They probably heard all about how the sheriffs been taxing everyone to death and how hungry we've been. I'm sure they wanted to help us out.'

'Robin's so nice,' Sis said with a dreamy sigh. 'Of course he'd want to help.'

Skippy rolled his eyes. 'That doesn't explain where he got the money,' he said.

'Don't you get it? Robin's rich! Or he used to be, anyway. He probably has a pile of gold back at his family's estate. He can't use it, of course. Being an outlaw. So he decided to give it to us!'

Skippy nodded slowly. That made a lot of sense. It also meant that the gold wasn't stolen. So there was no reason at all they shouldn't be able to spend it...

His gaze shot towards the door. 'We have to tell the grown-ups what you saw,' he told Toby. 'Everyone in town. Otherwise, they might try to give the gold back to the sheriff'

or something. And all of Robin's hard work will have been for nothing?

Toby's eyes widened. 'You're right,' he said. He headed to the door. 'Come on. Let's go tell everyone about Robin Hood!'

CHAPTLE TWLNTY-ONE

Morning came too soon—the sun showing no mercy as it blasted through her window and onto her face. At first Marian considered pulling the blankets back over her head to combat this rude interruption to her slumber, but then she remembered what would be happening this morning in Nottingham. And a thrill of excitement made all thoughts of sleep disappear.

She got out of bed, humming to herself as she slipped on her gown and brushed her fur. When she emerged from the bedroom, she found Kluck sweeping away the ashy footprints they'd made when returning through the fireplace the night before. Her attendant looked up and smiled at her.

‘You’re in a good mood this morning,’ she noted.

‘And why wouldn’t I be?’ Marian replied airily* ‘The sun is shining. The citizens of Nottingham will soon be waking up to their . . . breakfasts? She shot Kluck a conspiratorial grin. ‘They’re going to be so surprised?’

‘I’ve no doubt,’ Kluck agreed. She gazed upon Marian, her eyes a bit moist. ‘You did good, m’lady. Your kind heart deserves every happiness?’

Marian knew Kluck meant her words to be encouraging. But instead they brought a shadow of sadness to her face. *Happiness*. Could she really find happiness in a world that had been tipped upside down? Her uncle was dead. Her best friend was out there, living the life of an outlaw.

So much had gone so horribly wrong. Could a few golden coins really make a difference?

She shook her head. No. She could not think like that. Sure, she couldn't solve all the land's problems—at least not right away. But she had made a start last night. And that was something. In fact, it was a lot.

‘Well, it's only the beginning,’ she declared, drumming up her bravado. ‘Which reminds me? She glanced at the door, remembering the guards outside. She dropped her voice to a whisper. ‘Are we going to ... you know ... ?’

‘Play *badminton*?’¹ Kluck finished for her, giving her a knowing wink. ‘Perhaps. I mean, if you think you are up to it. And are not too sore from yesterday's ... match?’

Marian considered this. In truth, she was sore all over and tired too. But she was also eager for her next lesson in combat—er, badminton. ‘Oh, I’ll be fine,’ she assured her lady-in-waiting. ‘In fact, I’m—’

She was interrupted by a brisk knock at the door. Marian glanced at Kluck, frowning. The chicken shrugged.

‘Come in,’ Marian called a bit hesitantly.

The door opened, and Joffrey, one of the rhino guards from the day before, stepped into the room, clearing his throat loudly.

‘M’lady,’ he announced. ‘His Royal Majesty, Prince John, has extended the invitation for you to join him in the grand hall this morning for breakfast.’ He glanced at Kluck. ‘Um, if you are feeling better, that is,’ he added hastily, as if a little nervous about what her lady-in-waiting was about to say.

‘Feeling better?’ Marian asked, cocking her head.

‘Yes!’ Kluck said quickly, discreetly shooting her a look. ‘You know, last night you were too ill to go to dinner, remember? You were sound asleep when they came to ask. But I let him know.’ She smiled guilelessly at the guard, who looked a little sheepish, and Marian held back a giggle, wishing she could have been privy to Kluck’s dressing him down the night before.

‘Oh. Of course.’ She faked a small cough. ‘I was most unwell.’ Then she turned to Joffrey. ‘But don’t worry, I feel so much better now,’ she assured him.

‘And I would like nothing more than to join His Majesty for breakfast.’

A lie, of course. In truth, there was little she wanted less than to share a meal with the snivelling, thumb-sucking, so-called king of England. But at the same time, she couldn’t exactly hold him off forever. And maybe this would be a chance for her to hear his side of the story of what happened the night before. She

was sure he had quite a tale to tell about the brazen carriage robbery.

Very well. I'll be outside your room when you're ready,' Joffrey said, bowing low. Then he stepped out, closing the door behind him. Marian made a face at Lady Kluck.

'Well, this ought to be fun,' she said with a snort, donning her hat and veil. She started towards the door, then stopped, turning back to her attendant. 'You don't think Prince John suspects anything, do you?'

'Of you? Highly doubtful,' Kluck replied, rolling her eyes. 'If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that everyone underestimates a well-dressed lady.'

Marian giggled. 'They've definitely underestimated you,' she agreed, thinking back to Kluck's performance in the forest with the prince's guards. 'Much to their peril.'

Kluck smirked. Then she grew serious. 'Just be careful to mind your tongue,' she reminded Marian. 'No matter

what may be said at breakfast or elsewhere. I know all too well from raising you how much it pains you to stay silent when you get offended by something said?

Marian grinned ruefully, remembering the many times she'd voiced her opinion in her uncle's council as a child. He'd Loved hearing her young thoughts, of course, even when she disagreed with him. However, she knew Prince John—and definitely Sir Hiss—would likely feel differently.

'Make him believe you are on his side in all things—even the despicable ones,' Kluck continued. 'Treat every word from his mouth as if it came from God himself? The chicken fluffed her feathers. 'You have to prove to him that you're not a threat. It's the only way to ensure you will be granted freedom to act as you will, without arousing suspicion?

'I'll do my best,' Marian assured her. 'Though it won't be easy? She wrinkled her nose, imagining having to suck up to His Royal Sulkiness. Kluck laughed and patted her on the shoulder.

'I know you'll do me proud,' she said. 'Now go. Eat.'

Marian hugged her nursemaid, then walked over to knock on the door, letting Joffrey know she was ready. Soon she was following him down the stone steps and across the long hallway that lead to the castle's great hall.

Going into the lion's den. Literally.

The first thing she noticed when she entered the hall was' how empty it was. The long row tables that had occupied the space when her uncle was king were gone, with only a single table remaining, raised on a platform and draped in- purple cloth. There Prince John sat alone, surrounded by enough food to feed an entire town. Platters of fish, great hunks of cheese, fresh fruits and vegetables and sugary desserts filled every space.

Marian thought back to the times she'd dined in this room in the past, when the hall seemed almost alive, so packed it was with nobles and knights and even towns- animals, eating and drinking and making merry. Her uncle had always said he hated to eat alone and felt it was only right to share the king's bounty with as many as possible.

But Prince John had never liked to share..

She watched him from the edge of the room as he halfheartedly gnawed on a fish skeleton, his crown once again falling over his eye. He was slumped over the table and looked exhausted, as if he'd gotten even less sleep than she had.

She drew in a breath, squared her shoulders and lifted her snout, readying herself to play the part of the dutiful lady of the court.

'Good morning, Your Majesty,' she said, curtsying prettily before crossing to the raised platform. 'How are you this fine day?'

Prince John startled at her voice. He jerked to attention, pushing his ill-fitting crown back to the top of his head. 'Well, well,' he said, his voice slow and sulky. 'There you are. Nice of you to join me at last.' He watched her as she gracefully stepped up onto the platform and went to the place that had been set for her. 'You look very fresh and well rested,' he muttered. 'I assume this means you are no longer ill?'

'I am well, thank you, Your Majesty,' Marian assured him, slipping into-her seat. 'I had a good rest and a long soak in the tub. It does wonders to revive oneself after a long journey.'

I Prince John's eyes narrowed. He peered at her closely. 'For someone who has just bathed, you are quite ... dusty,' he remarked suspiciously.

Marian winced, realising she'd taken her bath *before* her adventures through the forest. She reached up, brushing her face with her paw.

'Oh!' she cried. 'Yes. Well, my room clearly hasn't been used in a while,' she explained. 'I'm afraid the dust was quite thick on some of the surfaces.'

Prince John frowned. 'Really? I told my staff to give it a full cleaning!' he cried, looking angry. 'Someone has shirked their duties!'

'It's all right!' Marian said quickly, not wanting to get a staff member in trouble with her lies. 'I've tasked Lady Kluck with giving it a thorough once-over. She is quite the professional, and I'm sure by the end of the day I will be able to see my reflection in all the surfaces.'

'If not, I'm happy to offer you a new room,' Prince John told her, still looking a little annoyed. 'You are my brother's niece, after all. Practically family! And in my castle, I believe everyone should be treated with respect!'

A serving rabbit stepped up beside him to clear his plate. The lion shot out a paw, knocking the rabbit backwards.

'Did I say I was done?' he growled. The rabbit bowed his head and scampered off in the other direction. Marian stifled a grimace.

'I appreciate your generosity,' she assured the lion through gritted teeth. And I love that you've given me back the chambers of my youth. They feel like home, and I wouldn't change them for the world.'

Also, I don't want to lose my secret escape route, she thought.

'But there is one thing,' she added after a nervous swallow. She glanced from left to right to make sure Sir Hiss wasn't in the room before she voiced her request.

Prince John raised an eyebrow. 'Yes?'

‘It’s just that I... love the castle so much. When I was a

little kit, I would spend hours wandering its halls and sitting out in your mother's beautiful garden ..

'It is a beautiful garden, isn't it?' Prince John agreed, his eyes wistful. 'Mummy used to read to me under the old apple tree. She loved that tree.'

'I love it too,' Marian said, maybe a little too eagerly. She tried to temper her tone. 'Which is why I wanted to ask you this favour.'

'Of course!' Prince John said, smiling dreamily, likely still thinking of his mother. 'Ask away!'

. 'Well, I would like to be given free rein of the castle during my stay,' she explained. 'And not be limited to my rooms—lovely as they are.' She looked Prince John in the eye, her own eyes wide and innocent. 'Would that be all right with you, Your Majesty?'

Prince John grinned widely. 'Of course!' he declared. 'I don't know what Sir Hiss was thinking, keeping you in your rooms. You're a noble lady of the court. Like my own dear old mummy. You should be able to enjoy her gardens. And all the castle has to offer.'

Marian laid a paw on his arm. 'You are so kind,' she said. 'And so generous. I am forever in your debt.' She was impressed she didn't vomit into her mouth as she said the last part.

Ai ♦ Oh! Think nothing of it!' Prince John beamed, utterly charmed. 'It's the least I Can do for my dear departed brother's niece.' He wagged a finger teasingly at her. 'But don't think you're getting out of that fancy archery tournament being held in your honour. We are going to celebrate your return whether you like it or not!'

Marian forced a delighted smile to her face. *Play nice*, she reminded herself.

'Sounds great! I can't wait!'

Prince John grinned back at her, then returned his attention to his plate, taking a huge bite of fish and chewing happily. Marian

had just turned to her own meal when she heard a voice coming from the back of the room.

‘Well, well, sire, aren’t we having a good morning,’ Sir Hiss noted as he slithered up to the breakfast table. His beady eyes settled on Marian for a moment before moving back to the prince. ‘And here I thought you’d still be in distress after having undergone such a terrible night. It’s good to see you’ve so fully recovered from your massive loss already.’

Prince John dropped his cheese. He shoved his crown back on his head, his expression darkening. Marian fought the urge to strangle the snake. Seriously, did he have to ruin everything?

Instead, she asked in her sweetest voice, ‘What is your little snake friend talking about? You suffered some kind

of loss?’ She felt Sir Hiss glaring at her but refused to look in his direction.

‘Oh,’ Prince John said glumly. ‘Yes. I didn’t want to scare you with this, but I suppose it’s better that you know. Last night I was headed home from visiting some friends in a neighbouring manor and our carriage was brutally attacked by cutthroats from Sherwood Forest.’

‘What?’ Marian feigned shock. ‘Cutthroats? They attacked your carriage?’

Prince John gave a fierce nod. ‘I told you it was dangerous out there, didn’t I?’ he grumbled. ‘And I wasn’t exaggerating. These thieves practically lamed my elephants, then stole a chest of gold, taking off into the woods like the cowards they are.’ He shook his head, disgusted. ‘My rhinos gave chase, of course, but they were vastly outnumbered. Why, we are all lucky to be alive!’

Marian resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Vastly outnumbered indeed. A single chicken had managed to take down his soldiers—all while barely lifting a wing.

But that would make Prince John sound incompetent. Couldn’t have that.

‘That’s so scary!’ she exclaimed, fanning her paw in front of her face. ‘Why, if I were there, I think I would have absolutely fainted with fear!’

Prince John smiled patronisingly at her. ‘It was definitely no scene for a lady,’ he agreed. ‘Though of course I would have protected you.’

Of course you would have, she thought. But she said, ‘Did you . . . identify the bandits at least?’ She held her breath, waiting for his answer.

‘I did,’ Sir Hiss replied haughtily. ‘And they’re going to pay for their crimes against the crown.’

CHAPTER TWENTYTWO

Marian turned to Sir Hiss, keeping her expression neutral. But her heart was pounding as her mind flashed back to the night before: Sir Hiss catching her in the act and calling for the guards. Had she underestimated the snake's eyesight? Had he recognised her as the thief? Had he been waiting for this moment since he'd arrived at the breakfast table to accuse her and call the guards? Her eyes darted to the door at the far end of the hall. Should she make a break for it before it was too late?

■ 'Who was it?' she managed to ask, trying to keep the tremble from her voice.

'Yes,' added Prince John. 'Who was it? And why aren't they already in prison?'

Sir Hiss blushed. 'Well, I mean, I don't know exactly,' he stammered, his earlier confidence seeming to falter a bit. 'It was very dark, you know. But it was a fox. I'm sure of that.'

'A fox,' Marian said slowly, relief washing over her in a tidal wave. 'Well, that does narrow it down.'

'Please! There have to be a thousand foxes in England,' Prince John blustered, sounding annoyed. 'I mean, *you're* a fox!' he added, pointing at Marian. 'Should we consider you a suspect, as well?' He giggled. 'Maybe you slipped out of bed late at night, found my carriage, stole my gold, then took out my guards!' He slapped his leg with his paw, practically howling in amusement. 'Now that would be something! Why, I'd almost give my gold away to see something like that!'

Marian snorted. 'I also must have taken out the guards Sir Hiss left at my door!' she added. 'Hurt them so badly they don't even remember me

doing it!’

Prince John roared with laughter. In his merriment, he whacked Sir Hiss hard on the back—so hard the snake fell off his chair.

Once he righted himself, Sir Hiss cleared his throat. ‘Yes, very amusing, Your Majesty,’ he said stiffly. ‘But in any case, we will investigate all angles. We will not rest until this fox—whoever he is—is punished for his crimes against the crown. No-one takes advantage of Prince John and gets away with it!’

Prince John nodded, grabbing another hunk of cheese and stuffing it in his mouth. ‘You do that,’ he told the snake, spewing bits of food into Sir Hiss’s face as he spoke. ‘And make sure it never happens again.’

Before Sir Hiss could reply, the back door burst open. Marian watched the sheriff barrel into the room, Joffrey and Gerald running behind him.

‘Sorry, Your Majesty,’ Joffrey cried. ‘But he pushed right past us.’ He gave the sheriff an accusing look.

‘My apologies,’ the sheriff said, not sounding, in Marian’s opinion, all that sorry. ‘But I’m afraid I have news that just can’t wait.’ He turned to the prince, bowing low. ‘I have solved the crime, Your Majesty.’

Marian stiffened. Sir Hiss cocked his head.

‘You did?’ he asked. ‘You found the thief?’

‘Well, not exactly,’ the sheriff said, shuffling from foot to foot. ‘But I found the gold.’

‘Where is it?’ Prince John asked.

‘It seems it was given to the animals of Nottingham.’

‘What?’ Prince John bellowed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I know it sounds strange. But this morning my spies in town reported that every single family woke up with exactly three pieces of gold on their tables. Which adds up to ninety pieces of gold—exactly the amount you say was stolen from you last night.’

‘It was ninety-one pieces, actually,’ Prince John said sulkily. He shifted in his seat ‘And I don’t understand. Why would someone steal my gold just to give it away?’

‘Not a very good thief,’ Sir Hiss muttered.

The sheriff shrugged. 'I'm sure I don't know. But if you give me permission, I can try to find out. Perhaps someone saw something—someone. And can identify the thief.'

'Do that,' Sir Hiss said, not waiting for the prince's answer. 'Find out who is responsible for all of this and you will be handsomely rewarded.'

'Yes, sir,' the sheriff said, turning to head for the door. 'Leave it to me.'

'Also, get back my gold,' Prince John piped in. 'I want every single piece recovered and returned to my coffers before nightfall.'

The sheriff stopped in his tracks. 'What?' he asked, turning around slowly. 'You can't be serious. You want me to find every piece of gold? By nightfall?'

Marian spoke up hesitantly. 'Surely that's not necessary. You have so much gold. Maybe just let this paltry amount go so the sheriff can concentrate on catching our thief?'

'Out of the question!' Prince John retorted. 'It's *my* gold. And I want it back. All ninety-one pieces.' He slammed his paw on the table and the plates shook. A glass tumbled over, spilling water across the wood. The lion didn't seem to notice.

'Or you're fired!' he added sullenly.

'But, Your Majesty—' the sheriff protested.

Sir Hiss hissed at the wolf, cutting him off. 'If His Majesty wants his gold, you need to *go get* him his gold. In feet, I'm not sure why you're *still* standing here.' He raised an eyebrow. The sheriff slumped, looking defeated.

'Sorry,' he said, bowing low. 'I'll get your gold. *And find* your thief.' He started towards the door, his steps a little slower this time. '*I live to serve,*' he muttered, walking through the door.

'Well, then,' Prince John exclaimed once the sheriff had left. 'That's that.' He opened his mouth in a huge lion yawn. 'Now I think it's about

time for my royal nap.’ He smiled at Sir Hiss. ‘Do hold down the kingdom while I’m asleep, won’t you?’

‘Of course, Your Majesty,’ Sir Hiss said with a self- satisfied smile. ‘Leave it all to me.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-TOLL ’

Marian walked out of the great hall, concentrating on keeping her gait steady and her head held high. But once the wooden doors had shut behind her, she broke into a run, dashing down the hall and up the stone steps. She pushed open her bedroom door. On the other side, Lady Kluck rose from her chair in alarm as she caught her mistress’s face.

‘What is it, dearie?’ she asked worriedly.

‘Oh, Kluck!’ Marian cried, throwing herself onto her bed. ‘I’ve managed to make a huge mess of everything!’

Her lady-in-waiting joined her on the bed, stroking the top of her head soothingly. Marian closed her eyes, trying to slow her racing heart.

‘What happened?’ Kluck asked. ‘Do they suspect you of the robbery?’

‘No, of course not.’ Marian made a face. ‘In fact, Prince John made a joke of the idea. Like, how funny it would be if it were me.’

Kluck rolled her eyes. ‘Then what’s wrong, my dear?’

‘They know where the gold went. Evidently the sheriff has some spies in Nottingham. And now Prince John has ordered that he go there and collect it all back while trying to figure out who gave it to them in the first place.’

‘Oh, dear,’ Kluck said. ‘That’s not good.’

‘It’s terrible!’ Marian agreed. ‘All my hard work and it will have been for nothing.’ She felt tears welling in her eyes. ‘And now the animals will suffer even more when the sheriff starts interrogating

them. They'll be worse off than when I started.' She moaned. 'I was a fool to try to help. I should have left well enough alone.'

'Bah!' Kluck said. 'You don't believe that. You did a good thing for those animals. And maybe this time it didn't work out. Fine. But that doesn't mean you should give up altogether. We just need to be smart about things next time. Robbing a coach brings unwanted attention. But there's plenty of food and gold lying around the palace that no-one keeps track of. You need to be clever. To outfox them, so to speak.'

Marian couldn't help a Small smile at that. 'I suppose,' she said. 'I did get Prince John to agree to let me wander the castle and its grounds. So I'll have access.'

'Now you're thinking!' Kluck cheered. 'Use your palace privilege to rob them blind. They'll never suspect a thing. Not from a fine lady like yourself.'

Marian snorted. 'Of course not,' she said, lifting her paw to the air in an exaggerated ladylike gesture. 'Also, Prince John mentioned that silly archery tournament again. The one he's supposedly holding in my honour. If that happens, it's bound to bring nobles and merchants from all around the kingdom to the castle. With wealth and jewels ripe for the plucking.'

Kluck nodded. 'Meanwhile, we can keep up with your lessons in combat,' she said. 'In case you find yourself in a tight squeeze. Should you get caught, I need you to be able to fight your way out.'

'Yes,' Marian agreed. She rose from the bed, her heart swelling. 'Do you really think I can pull this off, Kluck? I mean, really?'

'If anyone can, it's you,' her lady-in-waiting said, giving her a smile. 'Though I'm not going to lie to you—it will be dangerous. If you get caught—'

'Then they can call me a traitor like the rest of them,'

Marian said stoutly. 'But I will know I went down serving the true king of England. And his subjects.'

'That's the spirit!' Kluck crowed. She clapped her wings together. 'Now, about that lesson in *badminton*. I think it's high time we get started.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

By the time he arrived at the village, the sheriff of Nottingham was in a foul mood. He'd spent months going door to door, collecting taxes from these ungrateful citizens, and thanks to this robbery, he was being asked to go back and collect them all over again—but this time in one day!

No-one ever claimed Prince John was reasonable. But this was beyond! It was going to take countless hours to request each towns-animal turn over their newfound wealth—assuming they hadn't gone and spent it already—all the while trying to get them to confess who their criminal benefactor was. If they even knew to begin with.

But he was a public servant, he reminded himself. The crown trusted him to get the job done. And he'd do it too.

Unlike his father, who had contented himself with shoeing horses his entire life—with no desire to rise above his rank—the sheriff had ambitions. And if he was successful, well, maybe the prince would promote him knight him, even!

His lip curled into a snarl. If he was a knight, that haughty fox Maid Marian couldn't push him around anymore. He'd be her equal! She'd be forced to treat him with respect.

Yes, he would find the gold—and the thief. And he would get his reward, no matter what it took.

| Nottingham was bustling with activity when he arrived. Some of the shops that had previously been shuttered were open again, and the sweet smell of baking bread rose to his nose while his ears caught the sound of hammers striking anvils in the blacksmith's shop. He scowled; these traitorous animals had wasted no time spending the gold that wasn't theirs to begin with. But they would pay for their treachery, he told himself. And they would pay dearly.

He began to whistle as he strolled down the street, enjoying the feel of worried eyes watching him as he walked by. He heard the whispering among the animals as they tried to quickly pass the word to one another that he was there. They'd probably all try to run and hide their ill-begotten gold.

As if that would work. *

He stepped up to the first house, lifting his paw to knock. Usually he had a system in place: he'd start at the edge of the village and work his way in. But in this case, he wanted the element of surprise—less time to hide the gold.

He banged on the door—once, twice. No-one answered. Of course.

‘Open up!’ he called out. ‘By order of His Majesty, Prince John!’

The wooden door opened—just a crack. A small bunny face peeked through. The bunny looked up—way up—into the sheriff's eyes and then squeaked in surprise. She tried to slam the door shut. But the sheriff was used to this kind of greeting and stuck his foot in the door before she could close it completely.

‘Now, now, little lady,’ he scolded. ‘Don't be rude! I'm just here for a little visit with your mother. Surely she's not too busy to see me.’

Not waiting for her response, he shoved open the door and pushed past her to step into the small, humble cottage beyond. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of cooking carrots permeating the small space. Disgusting.

His gaze drifted across the room, stopping at the sight of a large family of rabbits crowded around a crude wooden table. They seemed to be celebrating a birthday. At the centre of the table was a small frosted cake with a lit candle shaped like a carrot sitting on top.

He cleared his throat. The rabbits looked up, freezing in unison. For a moment, no-one moved a whisker while the lit candle continued to burn down, wax dripping onto the cake.

‘Oh, don't let me stop you,’ he said, waving his paw in the cake's direction. ‘By all means, please go ahead before you burn your house down.’

One of the bunnies, a boy halfway grown, reluctantly leaned forwards and blew out the candle. The bunnies surrounding him clapped nervously, then turned back to the sheriff. The mother rabbit gave him a worried smile. ‘Would you like a slice of cake, Sheriff?’ she asked. ‘I baked it myself this morning.’

‘Don't mind if I do,’ the sheriff replied, strolling over to a nearby potted plant and peering into it. No gold there—unless they buried it. He headed to the table and reached down to scoop up a

generous hunk of cake, then stuffed it into his mouth, ignoring their dismayed looks.

‘Mm. Delicious,’ he said, licking his paw. He pulled open a drawer. Empty. Hm.

‘Can I . . . help you find something?’ the mother rabbit asked, her nose twitching.

The sheriff turned to her and smiled. ‘Actually, yes,’ he said, the cake putting him in a generous mood. He’d give her a chance to come clean. She looked like an honest rabbit, after all. ‘You see, last night a horrific crime was committed. Our poor Prince John was robbed in his very own carriage! All his gold, just taken! While he feared for his life!’ He shook his head in disbelief. ‘Barbaric, really!’ he added. ‘Don’t you agree?’

The mother’s nose twitched again. She was standing very still. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘That’s . . . terrible.’

‘Isn’t it?’ The sheriff walked into the kitchen area and peered into a large pot on the fire. Still nothing. ‘The things animals will do these days! It’s enough to make one question their life choices!’ He turned back to the mother rabbit. ‘In any case, I, as His Majesty’s loyal servant, have been sent out to recover what was stolen from him.’ He peered at her closely. ‘You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that now, would you?’

The mother rabbit stood stock-still. But the sheriff caught her eyes darting involuntarily to the left. He followed her gaze, straight to an old chest at the back of the room, half-hidden by an embroidered scarf.

His mouth curled into a grin. He took a step towards the chest, then another. He had almost reached it when suddenly he was intercepted by the birthday boy, who darted in front of him, his paws raised and squeezed into fists.

PRINCESS OF THIEVES

‘No way!’ the bunny cried, blocking his path. ‘That was a gift!’

He looked so fierce. His eyes were lit with inner fire. The sheriff almost wanted to laugh out loud. So pathetic, these villagers. Instead, he shoved the bunny out of his way, easy as flicking a fly. The boy screamed in surprise and pain as he slammed into the wall and went limp. His mother gave a horrified squeak, then hopped over to help her son.

The sheriff rolled his eyes. He stepped up to the chest and lifted the lid, then reached down to scoop up the three shiny golden coins inside.

He gasped as if shocked. He turned to the mother rabbit, who was cradling her son in her arms. ‘Such wealth!’ he cried. ‘How impressive! However did you come across such a fortune? Why, just last week you were telling me you had not a farthing to your name!’

The mother rabbit closed her eyes in defeat. ‘Go ahead and take it,’ she said. ‘I know you will anyway.’

‘But, Mother!’ cried her son. She shushed him tenderly.

‘It’s all right, little one,’ she whispered. ‘We’ll get by without it. We always do.’

‘But-’

‘But what?’ the sheriff asked, feeling rather cross all of a sudden. She was so humble and meek—as if she wanted him to feel like he was somehow the bad guy here, when he was

just doing his job! *They* were the ones with the stolen gold, after all. He was just after justice. ‘You think you have some kind of right to this gold? This gold belongs to His Majesty.’

‘We didn’t know,’ the mother said. ‘But now that we do, please take it. Just take it and leave us alone!’

‘Yeah! Leave us alone, you big bully!’ added the small boy rabbit, pushing away from his mother to stare at the sheriff defiantly.

The sheriff’s fur rose at the back of his neck. He released the lid of the chest, letting it slam closed with a loud bang. He stormed over to the rabbits, baring his fangs.

‘You know, you aren’t being very hospitable,’ he growled. ‘Especially seeing as you are in possession of stolen property. Perhaps I need to take you in. Teach you a lesson in manners.’

The mother rabbit’s eyes widened in fear. She backed away, making the sheriff smile. Now *there* was the respect he deserved.

‘Please!’ she begged. ‘I’ve lost my husband and I have a family who depends on me. Look at these children—they are so young. They cannot survive without a parent to care for them.’ She dropped to her knees, her paws in a prayer position. ‘Have mercy, sir!’

The sheriff pretended to think on this, tapping his claw to his chin. ‘Well, I suppose perhaps we can work something out,’ he said, *a clever idea forming in his mind.* ‘I will let you stay in the house with your sweet children. *If* you tell me where this gold came from.’

The mother swallowed hard. She glanced at her children, then back at the sheriff.

‘Don’t tell him, Mama!’ cried a girl rabbit. ‘He’ll just tell Prince John!’

The sheriff shot her an angry look. ‘The thief should have thought of that before he robbed the royal treasury. He’s broken the law. Don’t you reckon he deserves to be punished?’

‘I’m sorry,’ the mother rabbit said. ‘I don’t know who stole the gold. We woke up and it was here on the table. I’ve heard rumours, but...’ She shrugged.

The sheriff stalked over to one of the smaller bunnies—

a toddler, still dressed in her nightclothes. He plucked her off the ground and into his arms, causing her to drop the small stuffed rabbit she was carrying. She let out a plaintive scream.

‘Mama!’ she cried.

The mother's eyes bulged from her head. 'What are you doing?' she protested.

'You seem to have a lot of children, madam,' he replied. 'I count at least fourteen. Perhaps you are overworked.'

Perhaps this is why you were sound asleep when the thief came to town. I think it would be best if I took this little one into safekeeping for a while. Maybe it will help clear your memory.'

'You can't take her!' cried the boy bunny. He grabbed a wooden broom and charged at the sheriff, poking him hard in the leg. The sheriff growled loudly and lunged in the bunny's direction. He retreated behind his mother, squealing.

'Stop!' the mother rabbit cried, holding up her paw wearily. 'Please. It was Robin Hood. At least that's what some are saying. He was wearing a green hood that covered his face, but several swear they saw the Locksley crest on his cloak.' She closed her eyes, a defeated look on her face.

'Now that's more like it,' the sheriff retorted, dropping the baby unceremoniously on the floor. He was relieved she'd finally caved; he hated children. They made him itchy. The last thing he wanted was to have one with him on his rounds. They were going to take long enough as it was.

He tossed the three gold pieces into the air, then caught them in his paw before slipping them into his sack. He felt all the bunnies' eyes on him but refused to look in their direction. At last he headed towards the door, stopping just before exiting.

‘Don’t go anywhere,’ he said to the mother rabbit. ‘We may need to call upon you as a witness for the crimes against His Majesty.’

The mother rabbit bowed her head. ‘Of course, sir,’ she whispered. Her children gave him angry looks. He laughed, **then** waved goodbye, heading out of the house and back onto the street. Twenty-nine more houses. He had to get **moving** if he wanted to finish before dark.

But at least he had his fox.

‘Robin Hood,’ he muttered. ‘Of course it was you. You **never** did like to play by the rules.’ He chuckled to himself. **‘But now you’ve** messed with the wrong wolf. And I’m going to make you pay dearly.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

‘Oh, Mama, don’t cry!’ Sis begged Mother Rabbit, hopping over and putting her arms around her. Mother pulled her in close and gestured for her other children to gather round. After a big family hug, Mother sat them down and gave them a stern look.

‘You needn’t be worried,’ she said. ‘We will be fine. We were fine without the gold in the first place and we will be fine now that it’s gone.’

‘But, Mama, it’s not fair!’ argued Tagalong, her little face set in a pout. ‘That was *our* gold! It was a gift from Robin Hood!’

‘But we don’t know where he got it,’ her mother reminded her sadly. ‘And it sounds as if he might have stolen it from the prince. Which means it wasn’t his to give away?’

Skippy scowled. ‘But, Mama!’ he protested. ‘Prince John has more gold than he knows what to do with! And we have nothing! How is *that* fair?’

‘It isn’t. But sometimes life isn’t fair,’ his mother reminded him. ‘If it was, we’d still have your father with us.’ She sighed deeply. ‘Now come on. We have carrot cake to eat, don’t we? That’ll cheer you up?’

The young bunnies nodded and circled the cake, probably the last treat they’d have for a while—unless Robin Hood came back again ...

Suddenly Skippy remembered something. He hopped over to the stone wall and reached his paw into the crack. He smiled as he felt the cold metal and pulled it from its hiding spot. ‘Look, Mama!’ he cried in excitement. ‘There’s one left! Robin Hood left this one for me—

especially for my birthday. He hid it under my pillow? He held it out towards his mother. 'But I want you to have it?

His mother gave him a rueful look. 'Oh, sweetheart, I couldn't take your birthday gold?

'I don't mind, Mama. Really, I don't,' Skippy insisted. 'Not if it'll help the family?

His mother pulled him into another hug, this one a lot tighter, and Skippy squirmed, not pleased by the

overabundance of affection his gift had prompted. When his mother finally released him, he wrinkled his nose in disgust.

‘Yuck! Hugs!’ he muttered. But his mother laughed and kissed the top of his head.

‘Now let’s finish our party,’ she said. ‘We still haven’t sung to the birthday boy.’ She clapped her paws together, gathering the children around and then lead them in a rousing rendition of the family birthday song. When they had finished, she cut Skippy a huge slice of cake and then smaller ones for the others. Skippy dug in, feeling a little better. They might not have their gold. But they had their family. And that was what mattered most.

Still, he did worry a little about Robin Hood. He’d risked his life to give them that gold. And now he was in danger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

‘En garde!’

Marian raised the badminton racket—her makeshift sword—and dropped to a crouch. Lady Kluck circled slowly, her eyes never leaving her pupil’s. Suddenly Kluck darted forwards, slashing with her own racket. Marian feinted to the side, easily dodging the blow. Then, without a pause, she leapt in for the kill, “stabbing” Kluck in the side.

‘And I win!’ she crowed, raising her arms in triumph.

‘Not so fast,’ Kluck replied, lifting her racket to rest at the base of Marian’s neck. ‘You only grazed me. That’s not enough to take someone down. You must disarm them completely or run the risk of them getting in another go at you.’

Marian groaned, dropping her racket. ‘Every time I think I have you,’ she said with a laugh.

‘You were close,’ Kluck said, patting her on the shoulder. ‘And that’s - more than many can say. It can take years to become truly battle ready. But you’re getting the basics down. The rest will come in time.’

‘I know,’ Marian said. ‘I appreciate all this, you know.’

‘Appreciate what?’ someone said.

The two of them whirled around, surprised to find Prince John walking out into the castle gardens. Marian stifled a groan. At least he hadn’t seen them fighting.

‘I’m teaching her badminton,’ Kluck told the prince as he approached. She held up her racket and smiled guilelessly at the prince.

‘Would you like to join us?’ Marian added sweetly.

‘Me?’ Prince John’s eyes widened. His mouth curled into a grin. ‘You want me to play with you?’

‘Of course!’ Marian assured him. ‘Don’t we, Kluck?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ the chicken replied, pretending to be nervous. ‘I hear he’s very good. And we’re just women. Not very sporty, are we, lass?’

Marian shook her head solemnly. ‘Not very sporty at all,’ she agreed. ‘Not like you, Your Majesty.’

Prince John beamed. He ran over to grab another racket. ‘Oh, don’t worry, ladies,’ he said. ‘I’ll take it easy on you. You know my mother taught me this game. Ah, but she was a lovely lioness. So brave. So bold.’ He sighed, looking longingly over at the apple tree.

‘She was indeed lovely,’ Marian said. ‘Truly the best a lioness could be. You must miss her dreadfully.’

‘I do,’ he said. ‘It’s not the same without her. Thank goodness Sir Hiss came along. Or else I would be so very lonely. Why, he’s the only friend I have in the world, now that dear old Mummy has gone to the angels.’

‘Where did Sir Hiss come from, anyway?’ Marian asked, seeing an opening. ‘How did he become your advisor? Does he have experience in the role?’

‘Of course he does!’

‘Really? Where did he work before?’ Kluck asked.

Prince John thought for a moment, then scratched his head. ‘I don’t remember, actually. But I’m sure he told me at one point.’

‘And he went to school for this? He studied politics?’ Marian added.

‘I mean, I assume so,’ Prince John replied, wrinkling his brow. ‘I wouldn’t have hired him otherwise. I’m a very good judge of character, you know.’ He puffed out his chest.

‘When did you hire him?’ Kluck queried.

‘Well..Prince John was frowning hard. ‘I’m not sure I

remember. It was like one day he was there. As if he'd always been there.' He stroked his chin. 'Huh. That's strange.'

'That is strange,' Marian said, glancing over at Kluck. 'So he just showed up out of nowhere, asked to be your advisor, dissolved the king's council and started making the rules?'

'He doesn't make the rules!' Prince John protested, his head jerking up. 'I do! I'm the king, after all!' He stared at Marian suspiciously. 'Why would you say he makes the rules?'

Marian winced. Perhaps she'd gone too far. 'My mistake,' she said. 'I'm sure he just offers wise advice. And it's completely up to you whether you take it or not.'

'Exactly,' Prince John declared. 'I'm the one in charge. I'm the one who —'

'How many times have I told you not to wander off like that?'

Prince John leapt in alarm at the sound of the scolding voice. Marian turned to see Sir Hiss slithering into the garden. When she looked back at Prince John, the lion was hanging his head, looking ashamed. 'Sorry, Sir Hiss,' he said meekly. 'It won't happen again.'

Marian shot a look at Kluck. The chicken rolled her eyes. The one in charge, indeed.

Meanwhile the snake was looking warily from one of

them to the next. ‘What are you lot up to?’ he asked. ‘You look thick as thieves?’

Kluck laughed airily. ‘Just a simple game of badminton between friends? She beamed at Sir Hiss. ‘Prince John was about to show us how it’s done. He’s such an accomplished player. We’re bound to learn so much from him?’

Prince John nodded eagerly. ‘They’re not very sporty,’ he assured Sir Hiss.

‘I see,’ the snake said. Marian could tell he was still suspicious. ‘In any case, I’m afraid your little lesson will have to wait. You’re needed for much more important matters. The sheriff has just arrived back at the castle with his report?’

‘Has he learned the identity of the fox who robbed me?’ Prince John asked, all thoughts of sports apparently forgotten at the news.

Sir Hiss flicked his tongue. ‘He has?’

Marian fought the urge to glance at Lady Kluck. Oh, no. Had someone seen them during their deliveries and reported their identities to the sheriff? But then how could that be possible? They had been disguised! How would anyone recognise . . . ?

A horrifying thought struck her. No. That couldn’t be. They couldn’t have thought—

‘Well, then bring him here!’ the lion demanded. ‘What are you waiting for? My birthday? Christmas? Why are you always so useless, Hiss?’

Sir Hiss glanced at the ladies. But Prince John just waved him off. ‘Anything he has to say to me can be said in * front of Maid Marian,’ he stated. ‘She’s practically family!’

Sir Hiss looked like he wanted to argue this but instead nodded stiffly and retreated to retrieve the sheriff. Once he was gone, Prince John turned to Marian and Kluck, giving them an apologetic look.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘This is what they never tell you about being king. It’s always work, work, work. Why, sometimes I barely have time for my second afternoon nap!’

Marian opened her mouth to reply, but at that moment the sheriff entered the garden, accompanied by Sir Hiss. He was holding a large bag, presumably containing the stolen gold—stolen back, she thought with annoyance. All that work, for nothing.

‘It took me all day! And a lot of effort. But you’ll be pleased to know I got almost all of it back,’ the sheriff said proudly, bowing to the prince and handing over the bag. ‘There’s still a piece or two missing, but—’

Prince John tossed the bag aside as if it meant nothing. ‘Never mind that!’ he said impatiently. ‘I want to know about our thief! Have you found him out or haven’t you?’

The sheriff looked at the discarded bag, his shoulders slumping a little. But he cleared his throat and said, ‘I have, sire. The animals gave our bandit up easily enough. Once I .. used proper persuasion.’

He puffed out his chest and Marian winced a little. She wondered what this persuasion might have entailed.

‘So who is it?’ Prince John demanded. ‘Don’t keep me in suspense! Who is our thief?’

The sheriff smiled smugly. ‘Why, it’s none other than that dastardly traitor Robin of Locksley. Or as the villagers like to call him, Robin Hood.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Robin.

Marian felt her knees buckle under her. She started to sway. Kluck stepped to her side, holding her upright—which was a good thing, seeing as the world felt as if it were suddenly spinning off its axis as her worst fears came true.

The cloak, she thought miserably. Of course! I was wearing Robin's cloak! Someone must have seen me and recognised it. And now they think he is their thief.

‘Robin Hood?’ Prince John sputtered. ‘That arrogant fox? I thought I banished him from the kingdom months ago.’

‘Well, it appears he’s back, Your Majesty,’ the sheriff replied smugly. ‘And clearly, once again, he’s up to no good.’

‘I did tell you it was a fox, sire,’ Sir Hiss added, also looking satisfied by the news. Meanwhile Marian was having a difficult time breathing, tormented by torturous thoughts whirling through her head.

How could she have been so stupid? She’d thought of disguising herself only so no-one would know it was her. But she never considered the fact that her disguise would make her look like someone else—like another fox, a fox who was already a wanted criminal.

A fox who hadn’t wished to be involved.

‘Lady Marian,’ Sir Hiss said, raising an eyebrow. ‘You’re looking very pale all of a sudden. Are you all right?’

Marian managed to find her voice. ‘I’m fine, thank you. Just... surprised, is all. Robin of Locksley? A thief?’

Prince John studied her carefully. ‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘The two of you were friends back in the day, correct? Quite close friends, if I remember right.’

‘We were,’ Marian said, trying to keep her voice from trembling. ‘But I haven’t seen him in years. Not since he went away to war and I went overseas.’

‘So you don’t know where he is?’ Sir Hiss asked, narrowing his eyes.

She shrugged. ‘No. I’m sorry. I have no idea.’

Prince John looked disappointed. ‘Right,’ he said. Well,

it's probably for the best. Can't have a relative of the crown cavorting with outlaws now, can we?'

'Definitely not,' Sir Hiss agreed heartily. He turned to Marian. 'However, if he does try to contact you, you must let me or His Majesty know right away.'

'Of course,' she said. Then, against her better judgement, she added, 'But are we absolutely sure it was him? I mean, it doesn't sound like the Robin I remember. He was a law-abiding fox. And . . . well, rather self-absorbed, if I'm being honest. I can't see him spending all that energy robbing you just to give it away to the poor.'

Sir Hiss looked thoughtful. 'That's a good point,' he said. 'I mean, what if it's not really him? Perhaps the retd thief stole his cloak and used it as a disguise so he wouldn't be caught himself.'

'Well, there's only one way to find out,' Prince John declared. He turned to the sheriff, tapping his foot with impatience. 'Why are you still here?' he demanded. 'Go get me Robin Hood already! I want him arrested and brought here to the castle—pronto!'

'Yes, sire,' the sheriff said meekly. 'Except...' His voice trailed off, and he looked unhappy.

'What is it?' the prince demanded. 'More excuses? Seriously?'

'Well, it's just that we have no idea where he is.'

No-one's seen him since he was banished. Some say he's living deep in Sherwood Forest. But the woods are so vast, it would take months to comb through them all to try to find him.'

Prince John roared. 'Well, then you better start combing! What do I pay you for, anyway? I want you to launch a full-on animal hunt. I want posters, I want search parties— whatever it takes to bring him in. No-one in the kingdom should rest until Robin Hood is brought to justice!'

'Oh, this is terrible,' Marian moaned, back in her chambers with Lady Kluck. 'It just gets worse and worse. I can't believe someone recognised Robin's cloak! And then they went and tattled to the sheriff. Who does that to someone who's helping them?'

'Now don't be too quick to judge,' Kluck scolded. 'You know the sheriff. There's no telling how low he would stoop to convince them to talk. I'm sure they didn't give up his identity willingly.'

'Maybe so, but it makes no difference now! Robin's life is in danger because of me. I need to warn him.' She started towards the door.

But Kluck stepped into her path. 'Absolutely not,' she said firmly, crossing her wings over her chest.

'But, Kluck! This is my fault. I have to make it right.'

MAKI MANCUSI

'And we will, dearie. I promise. But not by running off to Sherwood Forest all by yourself without a plan. The sheriff's men will be scouring the place by now, ready to strike first and ask questions later. At best you would be captured and implicated as a traitor, just like Robin. At worst . . . The chicken's voice trailed off, and she shook her head solemnly. Marian sighed.

'So what do we do, then? We can't just let them be caught unaware.'

'I'll make some inquiries. Someone has to be getting them supplies and word from town. We'll find out who it is and we'll pass the warning on to them to deliver to Robin. And don't worry,' she added, catching Marian's distraught look. 'Robin is a very clever fox. Think about all the trouble the two of you got up to as children, and you never got caught. He's not going

to make it easy for the sheriff's army to find him and his men. Remember, they're already wanted animals, already hiding out at a secret camp in the middle of a gigantic wood. It's not like they're just going to show up to the castle one day hoping to be invited to tea.'

Marian sank into a nearby chair. 'You're right,' she said, scrubbing her face with her paws. 'I know you're right. I just feel so guilty. All I wanted to do was make things better for my uncle's subjects.'

'And I hope you will continue to do so,' Kluck reminded

her. 'In fact, maybe in a strange way this case of mistaken identity will work in your favour?

Marian looked up sharply. Kluck laughed.

'As long as they think Robin is their thief, they won't be watching over you. Giving you a better chance to help those in town? She paused. 'I mean, if you still have the desire, that is?

'Of course I do!' Marian cried, a little indignant. 'Why, their poor heads have to be spinning right about now. To wake up to gold, only to have it stolen away again, just as quickly? She made a face. 'And did you see? Prince John didn't even care about the gold when the sheriff brought it back. He just didn't want them to have it?

'He's a petty, greedy little lion, and he doesn't deserve the throne he sits on,' Kluck agreed. 'And that snake of his is even worse?

Marian wrinkled her snout. 'Do you think John's being controlled somehow by Sir Hiss? I mean, he's awful, of course. But it's like there's something else going on with him too. The way he agrees to everything that snake says. And then he acts so different when Sir Hiss isn't around?

'I noticed that,' Kluck said thoughtfully. 'It makes me wonder too. We need to keep a careful eye on that snake. I feel there's something suspicious about him—though I can't quite put my feathers on it?

MARI M A N C U S I

‘Agreed,’ Marian said. ‘If we could just catch him in some wrongdoing, maybe we could convince John to get rid of him for good. And then reinstate the king’s council. And they can change the laws and lower taxes and—’

‘Save the kingdom of England,’ Kluck finished with a smile. ‘It’s a tall order, dearie. But if anyone can do it, it’ll be you?’

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

If Prince John was distraught about crime in his kingdom, he certainly didn't let it dampen his enthusiasm for the upcoming archery tournament being held in Marian's honour. While the sheriff and his recruits began the fox hunt for Robin, the prince ordered invitations to be sent out far and wide, inviting nobles from all over the realm to come and compete—and meet the soon-to-be officially crowned new king of England. By week's end, the castle and surrounding areas were flush with neighbouring nobles.

Some pitched their grand pavilions just outside the castle walls, creating miniature tent cities. Others, deemed more important political guests, took rooms inside the castle, where they were attended to by reluctant servants who were already overworked and underpaid.

The once empty banquet hall was alive nightly with music and dancing and songs. Feasts were piled high on the tables as the nobles and knights gorged themselves on the best fish and cheeses and breads England had to offer—which would have annoyed Marian to no end had it not inadvertently helped her cause.

For while during the day she worked her paws to the bone, playing the part of the perfect noble lady of the castle, helping the guests settle into their rooms and making sure they had everything they needed, at night she began her second shift—gathering leftover food from the banquets and sorting through the gold and trinkets she'd lifted from each noble's room. Nothing much—not enough that they'd ever miss it. But it added up quickly.

Once in a while, someone would accuse a servant of stealing a necklace or ring that happened to be a family heirloom. But the item always seemed to turn up in the end—after Marian helped organise a search of their room. Embarrassed, they would apologise for their mistake and Marian would gently suggest they give a piece of gold to the servant they'd accused, to make up for their slander.

No-one ever suspected the truth—that the grand lady

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of the castle who hosted fine teas with the most delicate sugar cakes would stoop so low as to steal their earthly possessions. After all, why would she when she already had everything in the world money could buy? Plus, she was just so genteel, so kind—the perfect lady in every way.

They had no idea that this perfect vixen, along with her lady-in-waiting, would slip into a secret passageway late at night, arms laden with the nobles' personal goods. They'd go down the stairs, through the once cobwebbed corridor (now cleaned within an inch of its life, thanks to Lady Kluck) and out the back door to the shores of the sea. She and Kluck had gotten so familiar with the route, they could even do it on the darkest of nights—when no moon shone through the cracks in the stone. And while sometimes Marian's ears would still catch the sound of soft moaning in the walls, she'd learned to ignore it and press on without fear. Whatever the ghost or creature might be, it was clearly harmless and did not intend to interfere with their work.

At first the whole business made Marian nervous. She thought about what would happen if she got caught. But as time went on, she began to enjoy herself more and more, her confidence rising. She was good at this, it turned out. And why wouldn't she be? After all, she'd had a lot of practice as a child, sneaking around with Robin, causing all sorts of

mischievous. And now she was doing the same—this time causing good trouble. She found it both rewarding and actually kind of fun.

Only one thing could have made it better: if her favourite fox were still by her side. She missed her partner in crime more than she wanted to admit. And while Lady Kluck was certainly a valiant partner—as well as a great trainer in combat—it just wasn't the same.

She no longer disguised herself as him, of course. No need to send any more trouble his way. In fact, she had gotten quite good at creating other guises, some so elaborate that even Kluck herself wouldn't have recognised her.

But it didn't matter in the end. For with each delivery of gold and food, Robin's fame only grew. Once they'd decided he was their benefactor, they refused to consider it could be anyone else. And by week's end, his name was on the tip of every tongue, his exploits sung about in every tavern. When Marian made her deliveries, she'd find thank you drawings from the children and small gifts from the adults—hand-knit scarves, honey cakes, even bouquets of wildflowers in heart-shaped arrangements, likely from blushing young maidens smitten with their handsome hero.

They all were so grateful to Robin Hood for changing their stars.

Marian didn't mind not getting the credit for her work.

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Her anonymity worked in her favour, allowing her to use her castle privilege without gathering suspicion. But she did worry about Robin as his infamy grew. What would the sheriff do to him if he was able to track him down? She didn't want to think about it.

If only there was some way to convince everyone that the foxy hero they thought they knew wasn't involved at all.

CHAPTER TWENTYNINE

Prince John plucked a piece of gold from a nearby chest, then tossed it back in disgust. It was funny; it used to make him so happy to count his money. The sound of each coin plunking onto the pile was like music to his ears. But that night even his riches weren't enough to soothe the savage beast inside of him. He was too angry about this Robin Hood nonsense.

The useless sheriff hadn't been able to find the outlaw. Nor had any of his guards. He'd had them searching the forest for a week and there had been no sign of him at all. And yet somehow the animals of Nottingham were still getting gifts and food and all sorts of stolen goods. And they were singing that traitor's name in the streets.

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While no-one cared at all about John.

It was enough to make a king want to throw his crown at the wall—or go crying to his mother. He had to admit, this ruling-the-kingdom business was a lot more difficult than he'd anticipated, and it was putting him in a very bad mood.

‘Is something the matter, Your Majesty?’

Prince John lifted his head just in time to see Sir Hiss slithering into the throne room. John quickly sat up straight, pushing the crown back onto his head. Sir Hiss was always lecturing him about his posture and looking like a real king. Once he'd even had the nerve to suggest John stop sucking his thumb!

Sometimes the prince wondered why he kept the snake around at all. In fact, he'd tried to let him go on multiple occasions but somehow always ended up changing his mind at the last minute—mostly because the snake kept him company. Sir Hiss made him feel less alone.

‘Yes, something is the matter!’ he growled. ‘Robin Hood! How is it possible he's still out there and not in my dungeons?’ He shot out his foot, kicking the chest by his feet and succeeding in knocking it over. A waterfall of gold cascaded down the dais and onto the floor. But Prince John hardly noticed it. He was too angry.

Sir Hiss flicked his tongue. ‘I'm so sorry, sire. You, of all rulers, should not be subject to such trials and tribulations.

‘Exactly,’ agreed Prince John sulkily. ‘I mean, come on, Hiss! How am I to endure it? He’s taking all the glory! They treat him like a hero! When he’s nothing more than a common thief. And no-one seems to care at all about what *I’m* doing to aid the kingdom. I might as well be rotten fish!’ He sighed deeply. ‘Maybe I should be giving money to the poor or lowering taxes. Then I’d be the popular one.’

Sir Hiss looked horrified at this suggestion. ‘Sire! No!’ he cried. ‘That is a terrible idea! The animals don’t deserve your gifts! Not after how they’ve treated you! If anything, you need to tax them *more*—not less. Take the gold back that was stolen from us! Show them who their true king is!’

Prince John shifted on his throne. He supposed that made sense. If Robin was going to steal from him and give it to the animals, well, then by all rights he should take it back from them. It was *his* gold, after all. Still. . .

‘But then the animals won’t like me,’ he moped, moving to put his thumb in his mouth before he remembered and dropped his paw in his lap again. ‘They’ll think I’m a bad king!’

‘Oh, please, sire,’ the snake scoffed. He slithered onto the throne, wrapping his back half around the arm of it. ‘The animals *love* you,’ he added, rising to meet John’s eyes with his own. ‘They *worship* the ground you walk

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on. They are *happy* to share their wealth for the good of the kingdom.’

Suddenly John noticed the snake’s pupils were spinning quite fast, turning in a mesmerising fashion. For a moment, he couldn’t help watching them. Then he blinked. And when he looked again, the snake’s eyes appeared perfectly normal. Strange ...

‘You’re right, of course,’ John said to Sir Hiss, feeling a new conviction rise inside of him. ‘We *should* increase the taxes. Get our money back. It’s only right. And I’m sure my subjects will

agree. They are loyal, after all. Just like you? He smiled at the snake. ‘What would I do without your wisdom?’ he found himself asking, though he wasn’t sure why.

Sir Hiss smiled. ‘Don’t worry, sire. You’ll never have to find out.’ He slipped off the throne and back to the floor. ‘Now, shall I inform the sheriff of your new policy?’

Prince John yawned loudly. ‘I suppose you should,’ he agreed. ‘In the meantime, I think I’ll take a little nap. All this important ruling has made me quite sleepy.’

‘A grand idea, Your Majesty,’ Sir Hiss said, dipping his head in the prince’s direction. ‘Get your rest. And leave everything to me.’

CHAPTER THIRTY

‘Well, well, you sly fox! You’ve been holding out on me!’

Robin looked up from tending the camp’s fire to find Friar Tuck strolling into the clearing, holding a piece of parchment. He watched as the badger proceeded to unroll the paper and present it to him. When he saw it, his mouth dipped into a frown.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘But is that meant to be me?’

He squinted at the sketch of what could only be described as a rendition of his own face, staring at him with a sly smirk. Above the crude drawing were the words *REWARD: A THOUSAND INGOTS FOR THE CAPTURE OF THE OUTLAW ROBIN HOOD*, written in bold red ink.

Uh-oh.

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He rose to his feet and strode over to Friar Tuck. ‘What is this?’ he demanded. ‘I mean, besides being a terrible likeness.’ He cocked his head, staring at the parchment. ‘Why, they didn’t even get my snout right.’

He kept his tone nonchalant. But inside, confusion rose. What had prompted this poster? Why, he hadn’t set foot in Nottingham or near the castle—or even his own estate—in months. And while, yes, he was still technically a wanted fox, Prince John had never undergone any actual effort to track him down. It was understood: he stayed away, he didn’t cause any trouble, and he was allowed to keep his head on his shoulders.

So why this sudden change?

‘Don’t act so surprised!’ Friar Tuck scolded playfully, wagging his paw. ‘You had to expect a little pushback to what you’ve been doing. Which is quite remarkable, by the way. I don’t know how you’ve managed to pull it off.’

‘Pull what off?’ Robin stared at him, confounded.

‘Oh, don’t be so modest!’ The badger laughed. ‘Everyone knows it was you! Why, the whole town is talking about you! You’re a genuine hero!’

‘Am I now?’ he said, raising an eyebrow as he plopped down on a nearby log. He stretched his arms over his head lazily. ‘And what, pray tell, have I done lately that has been seen as so heroic?’

Friar Tuck caught his look. His smile faded; ‘You know,’ he said, now also looking confused. ‘How you’re robbing the rich to give to the poor, obviously.’

Robin almost fell off the log. ‘I’m *what?*’

‘Come on!’ the badger admonished. ‘There’s no need to play innocent with me. Why, I had twenty animals come to mass last Sunday praying for your good health. They’re all so grateful, of course.’

‘Of course . . .’ Robin was lost at this point; it wasn’t funny.

‘Look, I know you’ve tried to be sneaky, slipping into town at night, leaving gold and food in all the houses while everyone’s fast asleep. But come on, Robin! Did you really think no-one would recognise your feathered cap? Your cloak? Why, it has the Locksley crest embroidered on the front. If you wanted to be anonymous, surely you would have worn something else.’

Robin found he couldn’t speak. His mind was too busy whirling. The hat. The cloak. The hat and cloak he didn’t possess anymore—because he had given both to Marian the night she’d come to their camp.

Aha! That explained it. Marian was up to some new tricks, robbing from the rich and giving to the poor—an ingenious idea, if he did say so himself. He felt a stirring of admiration rise inside of him.

Until he glanced at the WANTED poster again. While he appreciated Marian’s ingenuity, he didn’t love the fact that it was being credited to him. After all, he’d told her straight out he didn’t want to be involved, and he thought he was pretty clear on the reasons too. Couldn’t she respect that?

But he couldn’t say anything to the friar. While he trusted the badger implicitly, he didn’t want to put him in a situation where he might be forced to spill the truth, to put Marian in danger.

‘Look, I’m afraid there’s been an unfortunate case of mistaken identity,’ he told the badger. ‘For I have been here in the forest this whole time. And while I am rather overjoyed that the good citizens of Nottingham are being looked after by some *unknown benefactor*^ I have no desire to receive credit for their actions. Especially since they seem to come with some’—he motioned to the poster—‘strings attached?’

Friar Tuck laughed. He slapped Robin on the back. ‘If you say so,’ he said, giving Robin a knowing wink.

Robin groaned. Clearly there was no convincing the friar—or anyone else in Nottingham, he guessed. Not without implicating Marian, anyway. And Robin certainly wasn’t about to do that.

Friar Tuck shook his paw. ‘Now I must get back to the abbey,’ he said. ‘Just wanted to stop by and tell you to be careful with whatever you’re . . . um . . . *not* . . . involved in.’ And with that, he handed the WANTED poster to Robin, then turned and waddled out of the clearing and back into the forest.

Robin watched him go, shaking his head slowly. He stared down at the poster in his paws. It really was a terrible likeness. But then, it wasn’t really meant to be him, was it?

He smiled to himself. ‘Marian, you never cease to surprise me,’ he murmured as he tossed the WANTED poster into the fire. He tried to picture her dressed in his cloak, sneaking into the village at night, a sack of gold in her paws. The image made him chuckle. She’d always been so brave, his Marian.

In truth, it made him feel a bit like a coward.

He thought back to the night he’d brought her to camp, the fire in her eyes as she spoke of the poor and downtrodden in Nottingham. She’d always been so kind, so noble, so good—Just like her uncle, the king. Of course she’d wanted to do something, anything, to help her uncle’s subjects. And all she

had asked for was a little help with her endeavours, a partner in crime, so to speak.

And he'd turned her down flat.

He cringed as he remembered the disappointment on her face, the anger in her eyes as the others practically laughed her out of the camp. He'd tried to make it better—to

let her know he understood her frustration. But in the end, he'd let her walk away, out of his life for a second time—maybe the last time.

Because in the end she didn't need him, he realised. She was doing it all herself.

The thought hurt more than he wanted to admit.

'Heya, Robby! Have you seen this?'

Robin looked up to see Little John entering the camp, a piece of parchment in his paws. Robin groaned. 'Yes,' he said. 'It appears I'm a wanted man.' He gave a wry smile, gesturing to the paper. 'But did you see what the artist did to my snout in the picture? Now that's a true crime!'

Littlejohn wrinkled his own snout, looking down at the paper in confusion. 'What are you talking about?' he asked. 'Your picture isn't on here. Though your name is practically written all over it.' He presented the parchment to Robin. 'Look at this.'

Robin plucked the paper from the bear's paws, then rolled it out to better see what was written on it. Littlejohn was right. This was definitely not his WANTED poster.

He looked up. 'An archery tournament?' he asked. 'Presented in honour of Lady Marian?' He smirked, the irony not escaping him. There she was, robbing the prince blind, and he was in turn throwing her a party.

'Yup.' John pointed to the paper. 'And look at the prize?'

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Robin scanned the poster. 'A golden arrow?'

'The *other* prize,' John emphasised. 'Just below?'

Robin looked back at the poster. His eyes widened as he read the next line. ⁴'A kiss?' He looked up. 'Marian's going to give the winner of the tournament a kiss?' Suddenly there was a part of him that wanted to sign up for the festivities.

While another part felt a little jealous.

It's just a kiss, he scolded himself. And they probably didn't give her a choice about it.

Still, he couldn't stop the unwanted visions rising to his consciousness: some unknown archer with an arrogant swagger, sauntering up to Marian to claim his prize. All because he was good with a bow and didn't happen to be a wanted man.

He scowled, crumpling up the poster in his paws.

'It's funny,' Little John remarked, raising an eyebrow. 'And here I thought you didn't care about her anymore?'

Robin felt his face heat. 'She's the niece of the king,' he reminded his friend. 'It's my duty to look out for her?'

'Your duty. Right? Little John snorted. He pulled a chunk of honeycomb from his bag and began to suck on it

Robin sighed. 'You know what? I'm going to go check on her. Make sure she's all right?'

John pulled the honeycomb from his mouth, frowning.

'Check on her? You mean go to the castle? Robin! No. Absolutely not.'

'Why not?' Robin demanded, even though he could think of a thousand reasons: being a wanted fox, having a bounty on his head
...

'I'll go in disguise,' he declared. 'We've done it before—remember that time for Father Rabbit's birthday, when we slipped into the carrot field dressed as scarecrows? And hey, there's bound

to be hundreds of strangers milling around town for the tournament right about now. No-one will give me a second glance.'

Little John pursed his lips as if thinking hard. Then he sighed. 'All right,' he said. 'If you're dead set on it, I know I can't stop you. But, Robby, please be careful. You re my best friend, you know. If something were to happen to you . . .'

'Aw, Johnny,' Robin said with a smile. He walked over to the bear and grabbed the honeycomb from his paw, then took a bite. 'It's me we're talking about, remember? I'll be in and out before the sheriff's men even know what hit them.'

John smiled a little at that, then grabbed the honeycomb back from his friend. 'If anyone can do it, it's you,' he agreed. 'Just. . . don't do anything foolish.'

Robin nodded. 'Obviously,' he said.

M\ R 1 M A N C U S I

But even as he said the word, his mind flashed back to Marian, risking her own good life to help others. Was it foolish of her? Maybe.

But it was also incredibly brave

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

‘Alms? Alms for the poor?’

Trigger looked up from his perch on the castle wall to see an animal dressed in a tattered cloak and patched hat, dark glasses over his eyes, hobbling towards the castle gates. The guard vulture nudged his partner, Nutsy, who was snoring like a saw beside him.

Nutsy startled awake. ‘Wha-huh?’ he stammered.

‘Stop sleeping on the job!’ Trigger scolded. ‘We’ve got a visitor.’

Nutsy rubbed his eyes with his wings and peered down. He studied the hunched figure. ‘Oh! It’s just an old beggar,’ he grumped. ‘There are thousands of those these days, what with the king’s new taxes and all. Not worth waking up for.’

He settled back down on the crook of the castle wall, closing his eyes. A moment later he was snoring again.

Trigger shot him an annoyed look, then turned back to the figure. He tried to tell himself Nutsy was right. It wasn't at all uncommon to see a few beggars wandering around the grounds, especially with all the new nobles in town for the archery event. But there was just something about this one that rubbed him wrong, though he wasn't quite sure why.

He poked Nutsy again, forcing him awake. 'Come on,' he said. 'We'd better check it out.'

Nutsy rolled his eyes but followed Trigger, launching into the air and landing just in front of the beggar in the courtyard. The animal seemed to startle, then held out his cup, waving it shakily from side to side.

'Is someone there?' he asked, looking from left to right. 'Sorry. I thought I heard someone.'

It was then that Trigger realised the beggar was blind. And Nutsy burst out laughing.

'Oh, Trigger,' he said. 'It's just a harmless beggar! You were afraid of a little old beggar!'

'I wasn't afraid,' Trigger shot back, annoyed. He was beginning to wish he'd let Nutsy stay asleep. 'I was just doing my job. We have to check out everyone. You can't be too careful these days.'

'Careful of what?' the beggar asked, sounding curious.

Of Robin Hood, *for* one! blurted out Nutsy. 'He's been robbing the place blind! Er . . . meaning no disrespect, of course!' he added quickly, evidently remembering the beggar's condition. 'Prince John is in a right tizzy about it too!'

Trigger let out a frustrated breath. 'We don't need to share His Majesty's mood with every passerby,' he reminded his partner.

But Nutsy was not to be deterred. 'They say he's been robbing from the rich to give to the poor' he exclaimed. Then he scratched his beak. 'Hey! You look poor! Has Robin given you any gold?'

The beggar shook his head. 'If only he would, he said. 'But it appears I must earn my coin the old-fashioned way.

'You mean by begging?' Trigger asked, raising an eyebrow.

'I mean by entering the tournament,' the beggar corrected, as if it were obvious.

Trigger frowned. 'The archery tournament?

'Are there any other tournaments coming up?'

'Well, no. I don't suppose there are,' Trigger replied.

'But—'

'Wait a gosh-darn minute!' Nutsy interrupted. 'Are you saying *you* want to enter die *archery* tournament? *You?*' He scrunched up his eyes, looking confused. 'You can't do that!'

The beggar cocked his head, looking confused. 'Why not?' he asked.

'Because you're *blind*?' Trigger replied, annoyed he had to point it out. 'A blind person can't enter an archery tournament.'¹

'Is there a rule against it?'

'Well, no. I mean, I don't think so . . .' The vulture felt his feathers prickle. He could feel Nutsy watching him, clearly amused by his discomfort. 'But it's obvious!' he added, irritated.

'You know, I think perhaps *you* might be a little shortsighted yourself,' declared the beggar. Then he shrugged. 'But I guess we shall just have to wait and see.'

Suddenly Trigger felt a little ashamed. Which made him even more annoyed. 'Whatever,' he spat out. 'Do what you want. It makes no difference to me.' He flapped his wings, rising into the sky, determined to go back to his post. 'Come on, Nutsy,' he said.

'The sign-ups are thataway!' Nutsy told the beggar, helpfully pointing in the direction of the castle entrance. As if he expected the blind fox to see him pointing.

Except . . . Trigger frowned. Did he catch the beggar following his partner's wing? Just for a moment. He was almost certain he did.

He started to land again. 'Are you really . . . ?'

But just as he landed, the beggar stepped forwards, barreling into him head-on. The creature yelped in surprise, then flailed and went crashing to the ground, his metal cup flying from his paw, copper coins spilling everywhere. Nutsy rolled his eyes at his partner.

‘Watch where yer flyin’!’ he scolded. ‘You just made this poor guy fall.’

‘No, no, it’s my fault!’ the beggar insisted as Nutsy helped him to his feet. ‘It’s just . . . well, I guess I wasn’t looking where I was going.’ He winked at Nutsy.

Nutsy laughed appreciatively. ‘That’s a good one!’ he said, poking Trigger with his wing. ‘Get it, Trigger? He wasn’t looking where he was going! Get it? Get it?’

Trigger shoved him aside, still watching the so-called blind beggar stumble towards the entrance to the castle.

‘There’s something odd about him,’ he muttered.

‘Oh, you think that about everyone,’ Nutsy scolded. ‘Now come on. I want to get back to my nap—I mean, watch.’ And with that, he flew up to the castle ramparts, settled his back against the wall and closed his eyes. Trigger sighed, then flew up to join him.

It was probably nothing, he told himself.

But deep down he wasn’t sure.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Once he was past the nosy vulture guards, Robin headed straight into the castle, making his way towards the grand hall where the archery tournament sign-ups were being held. But just before entering the hall, he took a sharp left, heading towards the castle gardens instead. He knew it was a risk; it'd be hard to explain if someone discovered him. But it was also his best chance to find Marian. If caught, he could simply excuse his presence using his blindness. Had he taken a wrong turn? *Oh, thank you, sir. You are so kind to help me find my way back!*

He found the gardens easily enough. They looked the same as he remembered them. The big apple tree in the centre was heavy with fruit. And the flowers and bushes lining the paths looked well cared for. Which he supposed made sense; this had been Prince John's mother's favourite place. The lion might not be interested in taking care of his subjects—but his mother's garden? Well, that deserved all the tender loving care gold could buy.

It was then that he spotted the archery target on the tree, hanging from a low branch. He was about to examine it when his ears caught a sudden whooshing sound—and an arrow flew past him, puncturing the bull's-eye. He whirled around, startled, ready to feign blindness again—until his eyes fell upon the lavender gown and matching veiled hat, worn by the sweet-faced fox walking

towards the tree, bow in her paw. She was humming to herself as she wandered down the rose-petal-strewn path, and for a moment Robin just watched her, swallowing back a sigh before making his presence known.

'You're getting quite good,' he said as she reached up to pull the arrow from the target. 'Though I suppose you had a great teacher.'

She practically leapt out of her skin at the sound of his voice. She turned around, her eyes wide and anxious. He grinned and saluted her, pulling off his hat and dark glasses to give her a better look at his face.

'Robin!' she cried. 'Is that really you?'

He grinned, bowing low. 'In the flesh, m'lady? He

glanced back over at the tree, studying her handiwork. 'Are you thinking of joining the tournament, then?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know,' she said thoughtfully. 'There is a very good prize.'

'So I hear,' Robin replied, raising an eyebrow.

She blushed. 'I meant the golden arrow,' she protested. Then she sighed. 'In any case, I doubt I'd have much of a chance. I won a few matches while on the archery team at school, but there will be real contenders here at the tournament with years of practice.'

'Well, I'm happy to give you a few pointers if you think it would help,' Robin said before he could stop himself. 'You might remember I rather know my way around a bow.'

'That you do,' Marian said with a laugh. 'Maybe you need to enter yourself.'

'Ah! If only I could,' Robin said grandly, shaking his head. 'But, alas, it seems I'm *wanted* elsewhere at the moment.' He nodded his head to the castle wall, where a copy of his WANTED poster hung, then gave Marian a searching look.

She turned away, looking embarrassed. 'Oh. Right,' she said. 'That. I... can explain.'

'I wager you can,' he said with a lazy grin. 'And I'd really love to hear the tale.' He made a flourish with his cap. 'How the brave Robin of Locksley became the most famous

outlaw in the land—while not lifting a finger in the forest.’

‘Robin—I never meant—’

He held up a paw to stop her. ‘I’m not angry,’ he said. ‘Just. . . surprised, is all. When I saw my *WANTED* poster’— he grinned —‘I knew right away it had to be you. Only you could pull *off* something like this with such style.’

She sighed. ‘Yes, well, I didn’t have much of a choice. I couldn’t just sit around court, being forced to feast knowing others were going to sleep hungry.’

‘You have always had such a kind and generous heart, Marian,’ Robin replied, dropping his cocky air. ‘I admire that about you.’

‘So you really aren’t angry?’ she asked, looking surprised.

‘On the contrary, I’m quite proud.’

She gave him a rueful look. ‘Just so you know, I never meant to implicate you—I really didn’t. It’s just... the night of my first robbery—it was immediately after I left you in the forest. I was still wearing your cloak, you see, and your hat. But only because I was cold. I never thought about the fact that someone might recognise the crest embroidered on the front and draw their own conclusions.’ She hung her head in shame. ‘I felt terrible when I realised what I did. And I promise—I haven’t worn your cloak since.’

■Since?’ He raised an eyebrow.

She smiled. ‘Let’s just say I’ve made twelve successful deliveries at this point?’

MAKI MANCURI

Robin clapped his paws in delight. ‘And right under the sheriff’s nose too!’ he declared. ‘I would have loved to have been a fly on the throne room wall when they found out. Why, that snivelling Prince John must be absolutely seething over his lost gold?’

‘Oh, he is,’ she agreed with a small laugh. Then she sighed. ‘I just wish he didn’t blame you for the crime?’

Robin watched as she reached into her satchel and pulled out his feathered cap. She handed it to him. ‘I’ve been meaning to return this,’ she said.

He smiled, slipping the hat into his own satchel. Then he grew serious again. ‘I’m proud of you,’ he said softly. ‘But I have to admit, I’m also worried. You must know you’re playing a very dangerous game, Marian. If you’re caught—’

‘I’m not going to get caught?’

‘But.. ?’

She frowned. ‘I know what I’m doing, Robin. I’m not the same little kit that you left behind three years ago. I can take care of myself?’

‘Believe me, I know full well how capable you are,’ he assured her, raking a paw through his fur. ‘It’s just. . ?’ His voice trailed off and he was quiet for a moment. He suddenly wanted to say so much. But he wasn’t sure what she

was ready to hear. 'I care about you,' he said at last. 'And I want you to be safe.'

Marian didn't immediately reply. She just stared at him for a moment, as if not trusting herself to speak. The silence hung between them, thick and heady. Robin opened his mouth to say something—anything—to break it. But the words would not come. All he could do was look into her deep brown eyes and feel as if his heart were tearing in two.

Marian reached out, placing a paw on his shoulder. Her touch was both firm and soft at the same time—just like her.

She was so fearless, fierce. And he was ...

He didn't want to think about what he was.

'I promise,' she whispered. 'Just . . . don't come here anymore. I don't want you to endanger yourself—or your men. You didn't want to be involved and I'm truly sorry you ended up being so. But I'm working to fix that too. If all goes well, perhaps someday soon you and your men will be free again.'

Robin raised an eyebrow. 'What are you talking about?' he asked. 'How—'

Suddenly a voice interrupted: 'I knew it! You're no blind beggar! Why, you're Robin Hood!'

Oh, no. Robin flinched, looking up just in time to see the nosy vulture guard from earlier flying in and landing

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on top of the apple tree. The winged creature stared down at the two of them, fury in his buggy eyes.

‘Nutsy!’ cried the vulture. ‘Wake up and get the other guards! Now!’

Robin’s heart pounded. He turned back to Marian, who looked just as terrified as he felt. His mind whirled. He could likely escape if he moved fast. But he’d have to leave her behind. And he couldn’t implicate her in the process.

‘I’m going to grab your necklace,’ he whispered, a plan forming. ‘When I do, I want you to scream—as loud as you can.’

Her eyes bulged. ‘Robin—no!’

‘Marian, you must! If you don’t, everything you’ve built up will come crashing down. The animals need you. I won’t ruin this!’

He heard the stomping of approaching guards. He reached out, plucking the necklace from Marian’s neck. She gave him a horrified look. Then, to his relief, she started to scream.

‘Help! Thief!’ she cried. ‘Someone help me!’

Robin grinned. ‘Lovely to see you again, Marian,’ he said. And then he took off running.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Robin raced across the garden, Marian's necklace still clutched in his paw, hoping to reach the exit in time. But before he could make it, two rhinos carrying spears burst through the doors, blocking his path. He dug his heels into the ground, stopping in his tracks, then leapt to the side to avoid their charge.

'Stop in the name of Prince John,' they cried as they barrelled past him.

'Sorry, no time for that,' he said with a grin, leaping over a row of rosebushes and heading back towards the apple tree. When he reached it, he threw himself into it, grabbing on to the branches to pull himself to the top. The rhinos surrounded the tree, and one tried to hoist himself

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up. But the low branch cracked under his weight, sending him crashing to the ground.

'What are you doing, you dolt?' Robin heard Prince John cry below. 'That's my mummy's tree!'

Robin forced his attention back to his climb. He shinnied out onto a long branch, in range of the castle wall. He reached out, trying to grab the wall. But at that moment, the vulture who'd spotted him earlier swooped down, pecking him hard on the paw and causing him to retreat. He looked down at the rhinos. He was surrounded both on earth and in the air. What was he going to do?

With no time to think of a smarter plan, he threw himself at the wall. If he missed, he knew it would all be over. He'd crash to the ground and be arrested—or worse. But somehow, he managed to dig his claws into the rough stone as his body slammed hard against the wall on impact. He let out a loud *oofot* pain but forced himself to hold on tight.

'What are you doing? Get him!'

Suddenly an arrow whizzed past his ear. The vulture had perched on top of the tree again and was shooting at Robin with his crossbow. Luckily, his aim wasn't as good as Marian's, and he missed by an inch.

Summoning all his remaining strength, Robin hefted himself onto the wall, then pressed his body flat as the next arrow flew past, just above his head. While the vulture was

reloading his crossbow, Robin leapt up and dashed along the top of the wall. Looking down, he saw the guards setting up a ladder. Soon they'd be able to climb up and reach him, and he had nowhere left to go. Meanwhile Prince John was shaking his fist furiously.

‘I command you as the king!’ he called out.

‘You’re no king!’ Robin shot back. ‘You’re just a cowardly lion with a crown that doesn’t fit!’

The prince’s face twisted in rage. ‘Off with his head!’ he screamed. ‘Get him! Now!’

Another arrow flew through the air. This one hit its mark, and Robin felt a sharp sting in his shoulder. Pain shot through him, but he pushed on, realising he had only one possible move left—and it wasn’t a great one. Drawing in a breath, he leapt off the wall, into the castle moat.

Whoosh!

The water engulfed him and he sank like a stone. He flailed his arms, forcing himself back to the surface. He choked and coughed up moat water as he emerged, just in time to hear the creak of the castle drawbridge lowering. The rhinos were on their way. He quickly swam to shore, then climbed out of the moat and ran down the field as fast as his legs could take him, until he reached the outskirts of Nottingham.

‘Look, it’s him! It’s Robin Hood!’

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He turned to find two small children—a bunny and a turtle—staring up at him with awe on their faces. They had been playing some kind of game with a shiny new ball. Robin leaned over, trying to catch his breath. His

lungs felt as if they were half-filled with moat water, and the arrow in his shoulder stung painfully.

‘Is there somewhere I could hide?’ he asked the children. ‘I seem to have attracted some unwanted attention from the castle.’

‘Come with us!’ cried the bunny. ‘We’ll help you!’

‘I’ll stand guard,’ the turtle added staunchly, puffing out his shell.

‘Thank you,’ Robin said, relieved. He hated to implicate children in his escape, but at this point he admittedly could use all the help he could get. He followed the bunny to a small cottage nearby and went inside with him, slamming the door behind them. A moment later he heard the sounds of the guards storming into town, lead by the sheriff himself.

‘Where is he?’ the sheriff demanded. ‘Where is Robin Hood?’

‘He went thataway!’ Robin heard the little turtle say with an impressive amount of conviction. ‘If you hurry, you might catch him.’

Robin held his breath, his heart thumping. A moment

PRINCESS OF THIEVES

later, he heard heavy footsteps stomping in the other direction. He let out a breath of relief.

But it was interrupted by a sharp pain in his shoulder. He turned to find an older rabbit with glasses standing behind him, the arrow that had pierced him now in her paw. She twitched her nose.

‘Hope you don’t mind,’ she said. ‘It looked like it hurt.’

Robin closed his eyes for a moment, resetting his sanity. ‘Thank you,’ he said, sinking into a chair. ‘That was too close.’

‘Were you at the castle?’ asked the boy bunny. ‘Were you stealing gold for us?’

Robin shook his head. He considered denying the whole robbing thing but decided it wasn’t worth it. No-one ever believed him anyway. And maybe it was all right in this case. After all, his hero status had just saved his fur.

‘Nah. Just visiting an old friend,’ he said. ‘She, at least, was happy to see me. Can’t say the same for the sheriff’s men.’ He turned to the boy bunny. ‘That was quick thinking, son. How old are you?’

‘I just turned eight years old!’ the boy bunny declared proudly, thumping his foot.

‘Well, well,’ Robin declared. ‘A birthday *and* a daring rescue. Hmm.’ He tapped his paw on his snout. ‘Perhaps you deserve a reward.’

MARI

The boy’s eyes widened. ‘A reward?’ he asked.

‘Oh, Robin,’ the mother chided. ‘You’ve already given us too much.’

‘Nonsense.’ Robin reached behind him, pulling his bow off his back. ‘You already have an arrow,’ he said, pointing to the vulture’s, which the

boy's mother was still holding. 'So I suppose you need something to shoot it with?

'Wow'.' cried the boy. 'You're giving me your bow?'

Robin grinned. 'If you like?

'Gee, thanks, Mr Robin Hood, sir'.' The boy took pretend aim at the ceiling. 'How do I look?'

'Not much like Mr Robin Hood,' teased a girl bunny coming out from the other room. Robin guessed it was his sister. The boy bunny shot her an angry look.

'You shhh,' he said.

Robin smiled. 'She's right, though. There is something missing? He reached into his satchel, plucked out the feathered cap Marian had returned to him and plopped it on the boy's head. It was too big and immediately fell over his eyes. But when he pushed it back, there was a smile on his face that lit up the room.

'Boy, oh boy'.' he cried. 'Now how do I look?'

'Like a true outlaw,' Robin declared, slapping him on the back. Then he turned to the mother rabbit. 'I thank you, ma'am, for your hospitality. But I really must be going.'

PRINCESS OF THIEVES

'Of course, Robin. Anything for you after the kindness you've shown dur town,' she said, her eyes filled with gratitude. 'Why, for the first time since I don't know how long, we've had enough food to fill all the bellies in our house. I can't tell you how grateful we are for your selfless deeds.'

Robin squirmed a little at the praise, knowing he didn't deserve it. But at the same time, he felt proud of Marian. She'd done so much. And it had made such a true difference in these animals' lives.

She was a real hero.

'Will you do me a favour?' he asked suddenly.

'Of course,' the mother rabbit said. 'What do you need?'

'My friend . . . the one I visited today. Maid Marian. Will you keep an eye on her for me? She's all alone up there in that castle. And I worry about her. If you hear of any

harm coming her way—will you send a message through Friar Tuck? He'll know how to reach me?

‘Of course,’ the mother rabbit agreed. ‘You have my word?’

He bowed to the mother rabbit, then ruffled the children’s heads. As he walked out the door, he felt a warmth inside he hadn’t felt in a very long time.

Maybe he had stayed in the forest too long. Maybe playing it safe wasn’t enough.

Maybe Marian had been right all along.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

‘I need you to explain to me exactly what happened!’ Prince John roared, back in the throne room after Robin’s escape from the castle. He was in a foul mood after the near miss. ‘And don’t leave anything out!’

Marian bowed her head, absently reaching up to her bare neck, where her necklace had once hung. ‘He came out of nowhere,’ she said mournfully. ‘He demanded I give him all of my jewels. Thank goodness your guards came and caught him in the act. I don’t know what he would have taken from me otherwise.’ She let a tear slip from her eye and down her snout. ‘That necklace was given to me by my uncle. It was very precious?’

She wondered if she was overselling it. But then, what

choice did she have? She couldn't tell them Robin had come on a social visit. Then they might suspect her involvement in all the recent thefts. At the same time, she didn't want to make things worse for him. She'd done too much already.

'Poor dear!' Prince John patted her on the head. 'And what a brazen thief! To come into my castle like that and steal from my friends!' He wrinkled his snout in disgust. 'This is getting worse and worse. And no-one has been able to stop him!' He slammed a fist on the side of his throne. 'Do you know that in town they think him a hero? They sing about him in the streets!' He shook his head angrily. 'They should be singing about me! Their king! Not some outlaw!'

'Your Majesty, please try to calm down,' Sir Hiss soothed. 'You don't want to give yourself indigestion again now, do you?' He slithered over to Marian, giving her a suspicious look. 'So Robin didn't say anything to you? I mean, the two of you were dear, dear friends once upon a time. And he just walked up to you and stole your necklace? How did he get close enough? Why didn't you call the guards when you first saw him?'

'He was ... disguised,' Marian explained. 'As a beggar. I *felt* sorry for him, and so I tried to give him a farthing.'

'Such a kindhearted girl,' Sir Hiss said, flicking his tongue. 'And yet. . . it just seems so odd, don't you agree?'

There are riches all over the castle. But he came straight to you. Perhaps your old friend is still fond of you after all these years.'

'Fond of me? He took my necklace.' Marian argued. 'I don't think—'

But Sir Hiss was no longer listening to her. He had turned back to the prince, who was sucking his thumb in frustration. Sir Hiss cleared his throat.

'Perhaps I may offer a suggestion, Your Majesty?' he asked.

'What?' Prince John asked sullenly, not retracting his thumb.

‘As you know, we’ve been unable to get to Robin,’ he said. ‘But what if we got him to come to us?’

‘He did come to us! And we let him escape!’ Prince John roared. Sir Hiss took a hesitant slide backwards.

‘Only because we weren’t prepared,’ he reminded the prince. ‘But next time we’ll be ready for him.’

‘What are you saying?’ Prince John asked, furrowing his brow.

‘It’s simple, really,’ Sir Hiss said. ‘We’re already hosting an archery tournament. And we all know how good Robin is with a bow. If he were to enter the tournament, even in disguise, we would recognise him—and when he won, we could arrest him.’

‘But why would Robin enter the tournament?’ Prince John demanded. ‘He’s not stupid. He’ll know it’s a trap.’

‘He might. But that may not stop him—with the right motivation.’

Prince John groaned. ‘You’re talking in circles, you pathetic python. Get to the point. I’m late for my first evening nap.’

Sir Hiss nodded quickly. ‘Look, we’re already offering a handsome prize—a priceless golden arrow. And we know how Robin feels about acquiring wealth. But what if we upped the stakes even more? And offered not just a kiss from our fair Maid Marian but’—he smiled smugly—‘her paw in marriage.’

‘Wait, what?’ Marian blurted out before she could stop herself. ‘You can’t do that! You can’t just give me away as a prize!’

‘Of course we can,’ Sir Hiss replied smoothly, not missing *a beat*. ‘After all, as your guardian, it’s Prince John’s duty to find you a proper husband. Why, it’s done all the time!’ He pursed his lips. ‘Of course, Robin might not like that too much. His oldest friend being sent away and all. And he might feel the need to try to defend your honour.’

Marian felt her fur bristle. ‘I see,’ she ground out. ‘So you want to use me as bait.’

Sir Hiss shrugged. ‘I was thinking more ... motivation.

But call it what you like. The point is, Robin will sweep in to try to stage a rescue. Or maybe try to win the tournament himself—to steal you away. And then—pow! We arrest him on the spot.⁵

‘Pow!’ Prince John repeated, punching a fist into the sky. He grinned toothily. ‘I love it! We’ll make that sneaky fox sorry he ever messed with me and my gold!’

Marian tried to calm her breathing. ‘I don’t like this,’ she said. And I won’t be a part of it.’

‘You will if I command it,’ Prince John said. Then he scowled. ‘Whose side are you on, anyway? After all, you’re the one who just had your precious necklace stolen! And now you disapprove of a plan to bring the thief to justice?’ His eyes narrowed with suspicion.

Marian hung her head, realising there was nothing she could say. If she protested, they’d mistrust her. If she agreed to it, she could put Robin in danger—or find herself married to a stranger.

‘It’s all right,’ Sir Hiss soothed. ‘You’ll get used to the idea in time. Though for now, I think it would be best—for your own safety—to head straight to your rooms. You can stay there, under guard, until the tournament begins?’

Marian’s head jerked up. ‘What? No! You can’t lock me away again!’

‘It’s for your own protection,’ Sir Hiss assured her. As

even within the castle walls. And we don't want *anything* to happen to our sweet Marian. Now do we?'

Oh, no. Not again. Marian turned to the prince pleadingly. 'John,' she tried. But the prince only shrugged.

'For your own safety,' he said. Then he clapped Ins paws. Joffrey! Come take our lady Marian to her rooms?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Marian tried not to resist as Joffrey escorted her back to her rooms. She could see his sympathetic face; she knew he was just following orders and didn't mean her any harm. He was one of the good ones who had been kind to her from the start. And they were few and far between in the castle. She needed to appreciate them.

Her rooms were empty when she arrived. Lady Kluck must have been down in the kitchen helping out the chefs— or, more precisely, stealing all the food she could get her wings on, as she liked to do. Marian stepped into the room, wondering if she should ask Joffrey to retrieve her lady-in-waiting. They had a lot to talk about, after all. But then she supposed it could wait. **She was exhausted by the ordeal and wanted nothing more than a long nap.**

She realised Joffrey was still hovering by the door. 'What?' she asked, a little too sharply. Then she sighed. 'Sorry. It's been a long day.'

'I know,' he said, giving her a rueful look. 'It's all right. I just. . .' He shuffled from foot to foot. **'Oh, never mind. None of my business, I guess.'**

'What is it?' she asked curiously.

He shrugged. 'I just . . . well, I thought you should know that Robin isn't a bad fox. No matter what they say about him.'

She arched her brows, surprised. 'You know Robin?' she asked.

'I fought with him in the war,' he explained. 'I was young and frightened when we first arrived on foreign soil. And he was so kind to me. He took me under his wing. He taught me to shoot a bow.'

'He taught me too,' Marian admitted. 'Back when we were children. We were good friends, he and I. Until we were separated when he went to war and I went to Paris.' She peered at Joffrey. 'So you were with him in the war?'

'Till the bitter end. Fighting side by side with our good King Richard.' Joffrey puffed out his chest proudly.

Marian frowned. 'I see,' she said, pacing the room. She turned back to Joffrey. 'But now I'm confused.'

'About?'

'Well, you say you served under King Richard,' she said carefully. 'But now you serve under Prince John. Meanwhile Robin and some of the others who were at war are now wanted men, no longer welcome in the kingdom.' She cocked her head. 'Why is this? How have you managed to do what they could not?'

The rhino dropped his eyes to the ground, looking embarrassed. 'Well, m'lady, it's a bit of a long story, you see . . .'

'I have time, if you wish to tell it,' Marian told him, gesturing for him to step into the room and sit down. She tried to remain calm, but her nerves were jangling. For some reason she knew this had to be important—though she wasn't sure why.

Joffrey sat down. He kicked out his feet, looking up at the ceiling. 'Well, it all started the day we were travelling back from the war,' he began. 'A glorious journey, as you can well imagine, filled with celebration and good cheer. Everyone was thrilled to be back on English soil after all those years away. Most of all Richard himself. I know he felt guilty for being gone for so long. And he wanted nothing more than to get back to his loyal subjects at home. He kept joking about how relieved his brother would be when

he saw him. 'The last thing he wanted was to be stuck ruling!' he said.'

Marian wrinkled her brow. This was indeed the John she remembered from her days at the castle. He'd never wanted the responsibility of the crown back then. But clearly the lion had had a change of heart. She wondered if a certain snake had anything to do with that.

‘In any case, we were not far from home—maybe half a day’s journey from the castle—when we came upon a baby squirrel, lost in the woods. She was tiny and scared—sobbing that she couldn’t find her way home. Richard grandly declared that he would not leave one of his own subjects out on the road, all alone, where she could be harmed or killed. He told everyone we would pause our journey to give her aid.’

Marian smiled. That sounded just like her uncle. ‘I imagine not everyone was pleased about this,’ she ventured. ‘Being so close to home and all?’

‘Indeed,’ the rhino agreed with a snort. ‘And so, in the end, Richard gave us a choice. We could stay and help him on this last quest or press on and reach the castle that night. He was always so kind,’ he added mournfully. ‘And he knew how eager we were to see our families again?’

‘So you just left your king?’ Marian asked, trying not to sound as accusing as she felt. ‘In exchange for your own bed?’

The guard looked embarrassed. ‘You must understand! We were on English soil! We were aiding a baby squirrel— not going into battle! Of course, had I known what would happen ..His voice trailed off, and he looked miserable.

‘So what *did* happen?’ Marian pressed. She was close to something. She just knew it.

‘I left with a group of about ten. King Richard had ten more—including Robin—remain behind with him. Our group travelled all night and reached the castle around midnight. Prince John greeted us at the gate himself. We told him what Richard was doing and that he would surely be arriving soon.’

‘Did he seem excited about this?’

Joffrey scratched his head. ‘He seemed ... a little worried, honestly. I suppose because Richard was still out there, unaccounted for. Maybe he had some kind of intuition that something was about to go wrong that night.’

‘What about Sir Hiss?’ she asked. ‘Did he seem nervous too?’

‘I couldn’t say, m’lady,’ Joffrey replied. ‘He didn’t come out to greet us. It was late—he was probably already asleep. I myself went straight home, greeted my wife and children and then slept in my own bed for the first time in years.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘If only I had known ...’

‘About Richard?’ Marian asked. ‘What happened to him after you left?’

I can only tell you what I learned from the others who stayed with him that night. They say they found the squirrel's family—owners of a small inn called the Rose and Thorn, just off the King's Road to the north. They were overjoyed at being reunited with their child and offered to host the king and his men for the night. They would feed them and give them real beds to sleep on. It was very late at this point, and so Richard agreed.'

'I see. And then he was killed the next day?' Marian asked. 'After he left the inn?'

Joffrey frowned. 'No,' he said, looking confused. 'He was killed that night at the inn.'

Marian stared at him in shock. 'What?' she whispered, barely trusting herself to speak. 'But I thought. .

Her voice trailed off. She was too confused to continue. When the sheriff had told her the king was ambushed on the road, she'd assumed he meant on the actual road—not in his bed at some local inn. This changed everything.

'How could that be possible?' she asked, her heart thudding. After all, Richard would have been behind closed doors, surrounded by his men. Why hadn't they sounded the alarm?

'I do not understand it myself, m'lady,' Joffrey replied sadly. 'For Richard had ten able knights at his side.' He hung his head. 'Of course, they're not knights anymore. Once Prince John learned what had happened to his brother, he declared every knight present a traitor to the crown for failing to protect their king. He arrested the ones he could, throwing them in his dungeons, and only a few—with the help of Robin—managed to escape? He shrugged. 'So, to bring it back to your original question, now you know why I am still here and Robin and the others are not?

Marian's head was spinning. Why hadn't Robin told her any of this? Had he been too ashamed to admit he'd failed her uncle?

And there was another, more troubling question that nagged at her mind. While she knew Robin never would have betrayed his beloved king, she couldn't say the same for the others. Had one of them been in on the scheme from the start? Or was something larger at play here?

One thing was for certain: Richard's death had not been the random attack she'd been lead to believe. Which meant someone had a reason to

want him dead—someone who had the means to carry out the plan.
Someone with something to gain from the death of a king.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

‘What are you implying, Marian? That Prince John had his brother murdered so he could steal the throne?’

Lady Kluck paced Marian’s chambers, her anxious steps eating up the distance between walls. She ran a wing through the feathers on her head, clucking under her breath.

Marian shrugged. ‘I mean, maybe?’ she said. ‘Or maybe it was Sir Hiss. He’s the one who seems to be in charge around here. And, of course, he’s the one who would have lost his cosy position as court advisor had King Richard returned.’ She grimaced. ‘There’s no way my uncle would have put up with that slippery snake.’

‘But to kill the king!’ Kluck cried. ‘Do you really think he’d go so far?’

‘I don’t know,’ Marian said simply. ‘But I plan to find out. This might be exactly what we need to take Sir Hiss down. If we could find proof he’s responsible ..

‘How are we going to do that?’

Marian tapped her claw to her chin. ‘I think we need to go to this Rose and Thorn Inn. It isn’t too far from here, and we can sneak out through the hidden passageway and be back before anyone notices we’re gone.’

Kluck nodded thoughtfully. ‘It’s not a bad idea. Maybe someone there saw something that night. Or maybe we’ll find some sort of evidence left behind.’

‘Then it’s settled,’ Marian declared. ‘Meet me back here after dark. And bring some disguises for us too. We don’t want anyone to get wind of us asking questions. If we’re right about Sir Hiss, he won’t hesitate to have both our heads if he starts getting suspicious of our intentions.’

Kluck made a face. ‘Right you are,’ she agreed. ‘Leave it to me.’

Once they snuck out of the castle, it didn’t take long to find the Rose and Thorn Inn. As Joffrey had mentioned, it was right off the King’s Road—the main thoroughfare running north and south through most of England. It turned out to be a bustling establishment that looked as if it had recently gone through some repairs. The roof had been newly

thatched with fresh straw and shiny cobblestones lined the path to the front door. Even the wooden awning outside proclaiming the establishment's name and family crest looked freshly painted—gleaming in the moonlight.

Things must be good here at the Rose and Thorn, Marian thought. While the rest of the kingdom is falling apart. She couldn't help feeling a little suspicious.

She beckoned for Kluck to follow her inside the inn. They pushed through the heavy wooden door, entering a large tavern bustling with other animals, all eating and drinking and making merry. She assumed most of them were archery contenders on their way to the tournament. Stopping there for the night made sense for those who didn't want to travel after dark.

She stepped up to the bar, signalling for the bartender to come over. A moment later, a dog wearing a white apron approached, giving them a wary look.

'What can I do you for, strangers?' he asked suspiciously. But then they probably looked a bit suspicious, dressed as they were in male tunics and tights, hoods pulled low over their heads. The disguises were a little over the top, Marian had argued. But Kluck had insisted on it. As Marian had said, the last thing they needed was to be recognised.

'We're here by command of Prince John,' she told the bartender, having to raise her voice to be heard over the din.

'He asked us to search the room where King Richard stayed when he was here.'

The bartender coughed in surprise. 'Excuse me,' he said, once he'd recovered. He looked around the tavern, as if to make sure no-one else was listening. 'It's just... well, you'll be needing to speak to the proprietors about that.'

He disappeared into a back room. Marian and Kluck exchanged looks.

'That was strange, don't you think?'

Kluck shrugged. 'It could just be a touchy subject,' she pointed out. 'I mean, having the king murdered in your own establishment and all. That can't be good for business.'

'True,' Marian admitted. 'Though it doesn't appear it's hurt them much so far.' She gestured to the bustling tavern.

Kluck opened her mouth to reply. But at that moment two squirrels, a male and a female, leapt onto the bar. The male was dressed in a scarlet tunic made of fine fabric and trimmed in bright yellow. The female was wearing a lovely green dress with tiny acorns embroidered on the bodice.

The male squirrel bowed low before his visitors. 'My name is Pip,' he said. 'And this is my wife, Squeak. We are, as always, loyal subjects to His Majesty, King John.'

'*Prince* John,' Marian corrected before she could stop herself. Kluck shot her a warning look. 'It's just... he hasn't been crowned yet,' she added quickly.

'Right' Pip nodded as if this made perfect sense. 'Of course. My mistake.'

'What brings you here?' asked Squeak, peering at the two of them worriedly. 'Is something wrong?'

'I hope not,' Marian replied. 'But we are tasked to investigate the former king's murder, which we understand happened, most unfortunately, at your inn.'

The two squirrels exchanged looks. 'I thought that was already . . . investigated,' Pip said, looking uneasy. 'They told me—' He stopped abruptly as his wife stepped on his toe.

'Of course, of course!' she said, smiling widely. 'Whatever you need to do, we are happy to help. It was such a tragedy.' She put a paw to her forehead. 'We only wanted to show His Majesty our humble hospitality. To thank him for bringing our sweet girl home to us. But then those barbaric traitors!' She shuddered. 'To think it happened under our own roof.'

'I'm sorry,' Marian said gently. 'I can't imagine what it must have been like to be here when it happened. Did you hear anything that night? Or see anyone slipping away? Anything you can tell us would help.'

Squeak shook her head. 'I heard nothing. I saw nothing. I was sound asleep in my own bed. It wasn't until the next morning that I learned of the unfortunate . . . incident? She turned away as if still horrified by the memory.

'But what about the king's knights?' Marian asked. 'Surely they would have alerted you to a murder in the next room?'

Pip looked disgusted. ‘Those lot were all still sound asleep in their beds come morning! A more useless crew I’ve never seen. Especially the one who slept in the king’s very chamber! How he could have slept through it all, I have no

idea? He paused, then added, lowering his voice, ‘Though maybe he didn’t. Maybe he was the one who did the deed. After all, the door was bolted from the inside. Who else could have gotten in?’

‘Who was that?’ Marian asked, frowning. This was new information. ‘The one who slept in the king’s room. Do you remember?’

‘It was a fox,’ said Pip. ‘Like you. My apologies, good sirs, but I can’t recall his name?’

‘I do,’ Squeak chimed in. ‘It was Robin. Robin of Locksley. He was the one who shared the king’s chamber? She made a face. ‘And I don’t mind telling you, he looked very suspicious that next morning, once the deed was discovered?’

Marian glanced at Kluck, astounded. Robin? Robin was

PRINCESS or THIEVES

the one who they suspected killed the king? Of course that was impossible. There was no way Robin had anything to do with her uncle's murder. Robin loved Richard. He would have given his life to save his king.

But then, what *did* happen that night in the king's room? If Robin was there, there was no way he wouldn't have defended his king if he came under attack.

Unless he was drugged somehow. What if they had all been drugged?

■ 'Who came to collect the body?' she asked. 'Once you realised what had happened?'

'Prince John and his men,' Pip replied. 'They arrived first thing in the morning, thinking to escort him home. Prince John was distraught, of course, to learn of his brother's fate.'

'The way he wailed—I still hear it in my bones,' added Squeak, shuddering.

Marian frowned. While John's reaction didn't surprise her, the fact that he'd shown up at the inn the next morning did. Sure, Joffrey and the others had told him his brother had stayed out that night to help a baby squirrel. But they'd left before they'd found the inn, so they wouldn't have known to tell John about it. Had it been a lucky guess? She supposed Richard had to have stayed somewhere. Maybe the inn was the only obvious option.

But still, something didn't add up. Why would Prince John go to the trouble of tracking his brother down when Richard still had a complement of knights attending him? There was no reason to imagine he was in any danger. Had John just been so excited to see his brother he couldn't wait any longer?

Or had he already known exactly what he'd find?

'Can we still see the room?' Kluck piped in. 'Where the king was killed?'

Pip nodded. 'We can show you,' he said. 'But you must know, it's been cleaned a hundred times since he stayed in it. I don't know if you'll find anything of interest there.'

'We'd still like to see it,' Kluck assured him. 'Please lead the way.'

The squirrel nodded, then scurried off the bar and through the tavern, dodging singing patrons with mugs filled with brew on the way. At the end of the tavern was a steep wooden staircase, leading up to the inn's second-floor rooms. They climbed it and headed down a hallway.

'We gave him our best room,' he said. 'A room fit for a king. It used to be for kings, actually. This whole establishment was once a hunting lodge for royals before it became an inn. And this bedroom, I'm told, was where the kings would stay.' He smiled widely, as if proud of this little fact. Marian guessed he mentioned it often to impress his guests.

PRINCESS OF THIEVE S

At the very end, the squirrel stopped at a wooden door. He opened it and gestured for them to enter the room. 'This is it,' he said. 'Though, again, I don't know what you're going to find here.' He crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

'Thank you,' Marian said, throwing a glance at the door. 'I'll let you get back to your guests. We'll call if we need anything else.'

Pip stood there for a moment, clearly displeased about being dismissed. But in the end, he resignedly scurried out of the room, leaving Marian and Kluck alone.

'I think he's in on it,' Kluck declared once he was gone. 'He's acting awfully odd.'

'Yes,' Marian agreed. 'And his business is prospering while everyone else in the kingdom is suffering under cruel taxes. Perhaps he received a reward for his assistance.' She scratched her snout, a horrifying thought suddenly occurring to her.

'What is it?' Kluck asked. 'You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

Marian turned to her slowly. 'What if this whole thing was a setup from the start? What if the baby squirrel was only pretending to be lost to lead them here to the inn? Whoever did this knew Richard was too kind to pass up an

opportunity to help one of his subjects. Especially a helpless baby lost in the woods.'

Kluck nodded slowly. 'It's devious, but it does make sense.'

'And then at dinner they drugged the knights. And Richard too probably. That's why they didn't raise an alarm when things began to happen.'

'But what about the door?' Kluck asked. 'They said it was bolted from the inside. How did someone get in?'

Marian walked over to the door, examining it closely. Sure enough, there was a heavy wooden bar that swung down, securing it in place. 'Robin definitely would have latched this,' she decided. 'Which means the assassin had to have gotten in and out another way.'

'I wonder...' Kluck said thoughtfully. Marian watched as her attendant's eyes travelled the room, then locked on to something behind her. She turned to see what her lady-in-waiting was looking at.

A fireplace. Of course!

Marian ran to the hearth, feeling the stones. Kluck joined her, working the other side. A moment later, the chicken cried 'aha!' and the fireplace swung away, revealing a dark passage beyond.

'Yes!' Marian cried, her eyes flashing with excitement.

‘This makes perfect sense. Remember what the squirrel told us? This was a hunting lodge for royals before it became an inn. So they probably built a secret exit, just like at the castle, in case the kings needed a quick escape!’

‘And whoever attacked Richard knew about it,’ Kluck said. ‘Which, now that I think of it, implicates our owners even more.’

‘Agreed. Though I doubt they did the deed themselves. A little squirrel would have a hard time murdering a lion- even if he was drugged. Come on,’ Marian said, pointing to the secret pass-ageway. ‘This room may have been cleaned, but it’s possible the passageway was not. Maybe we’ll find evidence of the crime.’

She lowered her body to crawl through the hearth, then waited for a moment once inside to allow her eyes to adjust to the dim light. She found herself standing on a landing with a creaky-looking wooden staircase leading down into the darkness. She stepped cautiously onto the first step, holding her paw to the wall to keep her balance. Then she continued her descent, her heart pounding.

It’s just dark, she scolded herself. Whatever happened here was a long time ago. It’s not like they’re going to still be here, just hiding out below.

The stairs ended at a wooden door. She pushed it open,

then peeked through and was greeted by the forest outside: the back of the inn.

‘Well, this is definitely how they must have gotten in and—’ She was interrupted by a sudden squawk from Kluck behind her. She turned back to her attendant, frowning.

‘What is it?’ she asked. ‘Did you find something?’

Kluck pointed to the floor, illuminated by the moonlight from outside. Marian followed her gaze, then gasped as she realised what her lady-in-waiting was pointing to.

A shedding of snake skin—very familiar-looking snake skin.

‘I think we’ve found our proof,’ she said, scooping it up in her paw. She felt sick to her stomach. ‘The question is, what are we going to do about it?’

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Robin sat on a boulder, stirring the nightly stew listlessly staring off into the forest, feeling restless. He was safely back at camp, but his mind remained furlongs away—still thinking about his narrow escape from the castle and leaving

Marian behind. Was she all right? Did they believe her when she pretended to be his victim?

What a mess. What a terrible mess. He should have never gone to the castle. He should have left things alone. Now he'd only made everything worse. For himself—and, more important, for her.

'Hey, Robby! What do you think you're doing?' someone cried. Robin looked up, startled to see Little John running up to him, a worried look on his bear face.

MARI MANCUS1

'What?' he asked, confused.

'You're burning the chow!' Little John cried, pointing to the pot.

Robin looked down. Sure enough, the stew was boiling over and spewing black smoke everywhere. Whoops. He leapt up and tried to grab the pot off the fire but managed only to burn his paws in the process. He yelped, jumping up and down, waving his arms to cool them.

Little John groaned, shooing him away. The bear grabbed a pair of kitchen gloves and slipped them on before removing the pot from the flames and setting it on the boulder Robin had been sitting on. He waved his paw over the smoke, trying to clear it.

Robin sighed. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I guess I wasn't paying attention.'

'Clearly not,' John agreed. Then he peered at the fox.

'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine.'

'Come on, Robby,' John moaned, rolling his eyes. 'You haven't been fine since you got back from that castle.' He gave Robin a knowing look. 'You still thinking about a certain vixen with long eyelashes and a sweet face?'

Robin scowled. 'Of course not,' he said quickly— perhaps too quickly to be believable.

'It's all right, you know,' John said, patting him on the

back. 'You don't have to try to hide it from us. We all know you're still in love with her.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Uh, because we have eyes and ears? Because it's written all over your face?'

'Oh.' Robin scrubbed his cheeks with his paws. Was he really that obvious?

'Face it, Robby. Whether you like it or not, you are definitely not over Maid Marian,' Little John declared in a grand voice.

'Maybe you're right,' Robin said with a sigh. 'But it doesn't matter much, does it?'

'What are you talking about?'

Robin looked up at the sky. The clouds drifted across the field of darkness. 'What are we doing, Johnny?' he asked. 'Out here, I mean?'

'Keeping our heads attached to our shoulders?' Little John quipped.

'Sure.' Robin began pacing the camp. 'Meanwhile she's back at the castle, risking her own neck without a second thought. While we're hiding in the woods like cowards.' He turned to Little John. 'And the worst part is, they think I'm a hero!' His mind flashed back to the little bunnies, the brave turtle. 'When I've done absolutely nothing at all.'

‘Now look here, Robby. Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’ve given us men a good life here in the forest. That’s not nothing.’

‘No, but it’s not enough either. Marian has shown me that. Maybe you can’t change everything all at once. Maybe you can’t overthrow a kingdom. But you can do little things, and added up they can make a big difference.’

‘So what do you plan to do?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t have a real plan. I just know I can’t sit back and let Marian shoulder the burden by herself.’ He gave his friend a rueful look. ‘Like you said, I still love her. And loving someone means standing by their side, no matter what.’

‘I understand,’ John said, slinging his arm around Robin’s shoulders. ‘And for what it’s worth, I’ve got your back. Whatever I can do to help the cause, I’m your bear.’

‘I knew I could count on you,’ Robin said with a smile. ‘You’re a good friend, Johnny.’

‘And you’re a terrible cook,’ the bear joked as he pulled the ladle out of the burned stew, then gave it a taste. ‘But I love you all the same.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Marian and Kluck barely spoke on their way home from the Rose and Thorn, each lost in her own thoughts. Marian couldn’t calm her emotions, which were alternating between hopelessness and fury. How was she ever going to look that sneaky snake in the eye, knowing what he might have done to her uncle? And then there was Prince John himself. What had his role been in all of this?

‘If only we knew for sure Sir Hiss acted alone,’ she said, thinking aloud. ‘I could go to John and let him know what really happened at the inn. But what if John already knows? What if he gave the orders himself?’

‘He did stand to gain a lot from Richard’s death,’ Kluck pointed out. ‘He got to stay in power.’

‘But that’s the thing that confuses me. He never wanted the power. He didn’t even want to take over temporarily when Richard left. John is greedy and selfish, but he’s also quite lazy. And Richard was the only family he had left. His beloved mother’s son.’

Kluck tapped her beak. ‘Hm,’ she said. ‘Well, you did say you thought John might be being controlled somehow by Sir Hiss. What if the snake seeded the idea in his brain? Made him think he wanted his brother dead, even if he actually didn’t?’

‘I feel like we should talk to him,’ Marian determined. ‘Ask him some seemingly innocent questions about his brother. You know how he is—he loves to talk. And he might accidentally let something spill.’ She paused, then made a face. ‘Well, unless that murderous snake is slithering around, that is.’

‘When is he not?’ Kluck replied with a snort. ‘Why, I think the only time they’re not together is during His Majesty’s multiple daily naps.’

Marian stared at Kluck, an idea surfacing in her mind. ‘That’s it!’ she exclaimed.

‘What is?’

‘What if we paid him a visit while he’s sleeping?’ Marian asked, her heart beating fast with excitement as the plan formed in her mind. It was outrageous. It might not work. But if it did . . . ‘We could sneak in through the hidden passageways. I bet he has a doorway in his fireplace too. This way we can be sure to get him alone.’

‘Until he wakes and sees us and calls for his guards?’

Marian considered this. ‘Yes. That would be bad,’ she agreed. ‘Though . . .’ She pursed her lips. ‘What if he thought it was all part of a dream? And that he was talking to someone else, not us?’

‘I’m not following,’ Kluck admitted. ‘What are you saying?’

Marian turned to her attendant, a grin spreading across her face. ‘I’m saying, what if Prince John was paid a nighttime visit—by dear old Mummy herself?’

Prince John was snoring loudly. Marian could hear it all the way down the stairs as she and Kluck slipped through the hidden castle passageways late that night to get to his room. She had wondered, at first, if they'd have a hard time locating the prince's chambers. Turned out the direction was very obvious—and very loud.

They stopped outside his door, identical to the one that lead into her own chambers. Marian glanced at Kluck with a nervous smile. 'How do I look?' she whispered.

'Like a real queen,' Kluck replied with a grin, nodding to Marian's current ensemble. Her lady-in-waiting had borrowed it from the queen mother's former chambers earlier that day, which had been kept exactly how she had left them when she died, by order of her son. Kluck had brought back the queen's favourite gown, pale green with a golden tie around the waist and a matching veil, which now fell over Marian's eyes, disguising her completely. On her head, she wore a golden circlet—the queen's crown.

'Now be careful,' Kluck warned. 'If he starts acting suspicious, get out quickly. We'll figure something else out. But whatever you do, don't let him recognise you.'

Marian nodded. 'I won't. Just leave it to me.'

Slowly, she pushed at the door. It opened with a loud creak. Clearly this one hadn't been used in years. Marian froze for a moment as John snorted loudly, rolling over in his sleep. She waited, breathlessly, until he settled back into rhythmic snores. Then she turned to Kluck.

'All right,' she said. 'You know what to do!'

Kluck nodded, holding up her torch. As Marian slipped around the roaring fire in the hearth and into the room, the light flickered eerily, casting strange shadows on the wall. Kluck then poured a bit of water on the fire, causing it to hiss and sputter, and soon a bloom of smoke poured into the room, thanks to Kluck's fanning the flames.

Once the scene was properly ghostly, Marian let out a long moan—soft at first, then growing louder, then louder

denly sat up in bed, grunting and snorting.

‘Five more minutes, Mummy,’ he begged, then dropped back to his pillow, thumb in his mouth.

‘But I’ve come all this way to see you, my son,’ Marian said, trying to keep her voice low and haunting.

Prince John froze. He sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. When he pulled his paws away, his jaw dropped comically. ‘Mummy?’ he cried. ‘Is that really you?’

‘It is I, my son,’ Marian said. ‘Come back from the grave to pay you a visit.’

‘Oh, Mummy!’ Prince John blubbered. ‘You’re really here! I’ve missed you so much. It’s not the same here without you, you know. No songs or stories or hugs ...’

‘I know, my son,’ Marian said soothingly. ‘I miss you too. But...’ She drew in a breath. ‘Where is your brother? Where is Richard? I have searched the castle and cannot seem to find him.’

For a moment, John looked confused. Then the words tumbled from his mouth in a rush. ‘He betrayed me, Mummy! He was on his way back to the castle to kill me and take back the throne for himself. Can you believe it? My own brother! Wanting me dead!’

He looked so distraught, Marian almost felt bad for him.

Clearly Sir Hiss had used this lie to get his master to go along with his evil plan. And gullible Prince John fell for it, hook, line and sinker.

She suddenly felt the urge to shake him. *How could you be so stupid?*

‘I didn’t even want the throne to begin with, you know,’ Prince John sobbed. ‘Mummy, I hate being king! I just want to read stories and write poetry under the apple tree in the garden like we used to! I never wanted any of this!’ He thrust out his arm, as if to embody all that he’d unwillingly inherited.

‘Who told you Richard wanted you dead?’ she asked, trying to get back on topic.

‘Sir Hiss, of course,’ Prince John said. ‘He’s my advisor and he’s very smart. He always knows everything that’s going on. He told me that we needed to kill Richard before he killed me.’

Marian inhaled sharply. And there it was: the confession she’d been waiting for. It was Sir Hiss’s plan, but John had known about it and agreed to go along with it. Which made them both guilty of murder.

She could see Kluck waving at her from the corner of her eye. She knew she should leave now. She’d gotten her answer and she could still get away safely. But something inside of her told her to stay, just for a minute more. Maybe

she could convince Prince John to let go of Sir Hiss. Sure, it wouldn't bring her uncle back. But it might make things better for the kingdom.

She had this one chance. She wasn't about to waste it.

She took a small step towards the bed. 'Oh, sweetheart,' she said in her softest voice. 'From now on you should never listen to that snake. In fact, you should get rid of him altogether. He clearly doesn't give you good advice. Telling you to murder your own brother? John! I thought better of you!' John frowned, looking up at her with surprising confusion on his face.

'But I didn't,' he protested.

Marian cocked her head. 'Didn't what?'

'I didn't take his advice,' he said. 'I didn't kill my brother.'

Marian stifled a groan. 'Then how is Richard dead?' 'He's not!' John burst out. 'Don't you see? That was just

our cover story. Sir Hiss came up with it after I refused to give the order to kill him. Because we still had to make it *look* like he was dead. Otherwise, no-one would accept me

as their king.' He looked satisfied. 'Sir Hiss is very smart,'

he added. 'He comes up with the best plans.'

Marian stared at him, finding it difficult to breathe and not just because of the smoky room. Did he just say what she thought he said? And if so, was he completely delusional?

Or was Richard actually alive?

'Are you all right, Mummy?' Prince John asked. 'You look a little wobbly.'

'I'm fine, my son,' she said quickly, her voice a little hoarse. 'Just . . . where can I find your brother? I'd love to say hello.'

'Oh!' Prince John said with a shrug. 'He's under the castle. There's a special safe room down there. It was originally built as a place for nobles to hide in if the castle came under siege. It's quite lovely actually. Though Richard doesn't seem to appreciate it, if you ask me. He's always groaning and moaning and such.' He frowned. 'It's like he blames me or something! Sir Hiss says not to worry about it, but it bothers me, you know? After all, I saved his life!'

If Marian's heart had been beating fast before, now it felt as if it would leap out of her throat. Her mind whirled, trying to process it all.

A safe room below the castle.

Groaning. Moaning.

Just like her castle ghost.

Had King Richard been the castle ghost all along?

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

‘Mummy? Are you all right? Will you come tuck me into bed, Mummy?’ Prince John asked plaintively. He held out his arms.

/Somehow Marian found her voice. ‘Sorry, my son,’ she managed to say. ‘I’ve got to go.’

‘Mummy, no! Don’t leave me, Mummy!’ Prince John wailed, his voice louder.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door followed by a Voice. ‘Is everything all right, sire? I heard someone talking?’

Marian froze. Oh, no. Sir Hiss! She shot a look at Kluck.

The chicken beckoned frantically.

‘It’s all fine!’ Prince John assured him. ‘Just talking to my toother’s ghost!’

‘What? What are you talking about?’ the snake demanded. ‘I’m coining in!’ Marian detected the turning of a key in the lock. In a moment she’d be caught.

She dove towards the hearth just as the bedroom door began to open. Her breath hitched. Would she make it in time? Or would she be caught by Sir Hiss—who certainly wasn’t going to believe her disguise?

Suddenly everything went dark. Kluck had smothered the fire. Blindly, Marian kept running in what she hoped was the direction of the fireplace, praying she wouldn’t slam into a wall or trip over furniture on the way. Meanwhile Prince John was still whining for his mother and Sir Hiss was at the door, trying to figure out what was going on.

Marian found the hearth. She pushed through the opening, then slid the door shut behind her, hoping the noise would go unnoticed in the commotion. Without a pause, she and Kluck ran down the corridor and

down the stairs as fast as they could, not stopping until they'd reached the safety of Marian's room again.

Marian collapsed onto the bed, yanking the veil off her head as she sucked in huge breaths. Kluck sat down next to her, also winded. For a moment they didn't speak»

'I can't believe it,' Marian whispered, once she'd found her voice again. 'Do you really think it's true? That my uncle is still alive? That he's been here in the castle this whole time?'

'I think so,' Kluck said solemnly. 'Prince John would never lie to his mother. If he told her Richard was alive? Well, I believe it.'

Marian sat up in bed. 'We have to go to him!' she cried.

But to her surprise, Kluck shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'Not now. Not when we have no idea what we're walking into. We don't know how many guards are stationed at his cell. And we don't know what John is telling Hiss right now about what he just confessed to his supposed ghost mother. We can't risk our own lives—or Richard's—by acting hastily.'

Marian hung her head. She knew her attendant was right. But still! 'I can't bear thinking of him down there,' she moaned. 'He's probably so scared and lonely. I can't believe I've walked past him so many times and never known ...' Her voice choked on the last part.

'But now you do,' Kluck reminded her. 'And because of that, we can do something. But we're going to need backup to ensure we succeed. We'll only get one shot at this. We must not fail'

Marian's eyes widened. 'Robin!' she breathed. 'We need

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to tell Robin. He will help us. I'm sure he will, once he learns his king is still alive. Maybe his men will too.'

Kluck nodded in agreement. 'If anything will get them moving, it will be this.'

'All right, then,' Marian said. 'We'll go to Robin at first light. And we'll stop by the abbey on the way too, to let Friar Tuck know the news. This way if anything happens to us, he'll be able to tell our story to the others.'

She smiled a little. She couldn't help it. She knew things were still bad—really, really bad.

But her uncle was alive. That was what mattered.

Maybe, just maybe, she could save the kingdom yet.

CHAPTER FORTY

Mother Rabbit was busy sweeping the cottage early the next morning, humming softly to herself, while the rest of her family slept in. It was still hard for her to believe how much better things had been since Robin Hood had started his crusade. She'd slept so well these past few weeks, no longer worried about how she was going to feed all her children. The only thing that could make it all better was if someday her husband would be able to come home again.

But that would take more than a crusade. That would take a miracle.

Suddenly Tagalong burst into the cottage, startling her mother. She hadn't realised the bunny was even awake, never mind already outside the house. In her paws was

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some kind of poster, ripped at the corners as if it had been yanked off a building or tree.

'What do you have there?' she asked pleasantly, smiling at her youngest daughter.

Tagalong hopped up and down. 'Mama, look! Look at this picture! It has that pretty lady on it. The one who gave me the carrot!'

Mother Rabbit pushed her glasses up her nose to get a better look. Sure enough, it was a picture of Maid Marian. But when she read the caption below, the smile faded from her face.

‘What?’ she cried, horrified. ‘They can’t do this! It’s barbaric!’

‘What is it, Mama?’ asked Sis, coming out of the bedroom, rubbing her eyes sleepily. Mother Rabbit realised, in her shock, she’d likely woken the whole house. With a sigh, she showed her older daughter the poster.

‘An archery tournament?’ she said. ‘A golden arrow as a prize and . . .’ She looked up, stunned. ‘The paw of Maid Marian in marriage?’

‘Imagine the nerve!’ Mama Rabbit cried indignantly. ‘She’s a full-grown fox! And a noble lady at that! How can they just give her away to someone who happens to be good with a bow? It’s not right! Not right at all!’

At that moment, Skippy walked out of the bedroom,

bow and arrow in his paw, as always. He hadn’t stopped playing Robin Hood since the real one gave him his birthday bow and arrow a few days before. Which had truly been a generous gift, Mother Rabbit thought. But then, Robin was a truly generous fox.

‘Don’t mess with me.’ Skippy declared loudly, raising his bow. ‘I’m Robin Hood! I’m the best archer in all the land!’

‘Maybe you should enter the tournament, then,’ Sis teased, showing him the poster. ‘You could win the paw of Lady Marian!’

Skippy stuck out his tongue. ‘Why would I want that?’ he asked, looking disgusted. ‘I’d have to kiss her then. And kissing is gross.’

‘It’s not like you’d win anyway,’ Sis scoffed. ‘You’ll never be as good as Robin Hood with a bow.’

‘I will too! Just you wait and see!’ Skippy charged at her.

‘Mama!’ Tagalong cried. ‘They’re fighting in the house again! You said no fighting in the house!’

Mother Rabbit *didn't respond*. She was staring down at the poster, her heart beating quite fast. Robin had asked her to look out for Marian. He'd want to know about this, for certain. And perhaps if he did, he could stop it from

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happening. He *was* the best archer in the land, after all. He ȝ©ȝId easily win the tournament.

And save Maid Marian.

She turned to Skippy and Sis. 'I need you to do me an important favour,' she said. 'I need you to take this poster to Friar Tuck at the abbey. Give this to him and tell him to get word to Robin as soon as possible.'

'Yes, Mama!' said Sis dutifully.

'Leave it to us!' cried Skippy, looking pleased to be given a quest.

'I want to come too!' begged Tagalong, bouncing up and down. Mother caught Skippy giving his sister a look.

'Now, Tagalong,' she said. 'Don't you want to help me with breakfast?'

'No, Mama. I want to go with them!'

'You can join them later,' she said firmly. 'Right now, I need your help.'

Tagalong's nose wrinkled in annoyance. But she hopped over to her mother. Skippy and Sis took this as their cue, exiting the cottage quickly before their little sister could change her mind.

Mother Rabbit watched them go, wringing her paws together. She just hoped they wouldn't be too late.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Once outside, Skippy and Sis ran into Toby, who was coming from the other direction. They quickly told him of their mission. He wanted to join up, of course, and together the three of them ran down the road towards the abbey.

Skippy was nervous—but also excited. It felt like a real- life adventure at last. Robin had done so much for him and his family. Now he had a chance to return the favour. Why, maybe he'd even become a hero!

'I hope we meet some bad guys on the way!' he declared. 'I'll get them with my bow and arrow!' He held up both in his paws, giving what he hoped looked like a menacing glare.

'Yeah, right. You couldn't hit a target three meters wide

and three metres tall,' Sis teased. Skippy shot her an annoyed look.

'I've been practicing,' he protested. 'I'm much better now.'

'Sure you are.' Sis stuck out her tongue. Toby giggled and Skippy shot him a dirty look. He'd show them all! After their mission, of course.

They arrived at the abbey a few minutes later, pushing through the front double doors and making their way inside.

'Friar Tuck!' cried Skippy. 'Are you here? We've got to tell you something important!'

But there was no answer. He glanced at Sis and Toby, a little worried.

'Where is he?' he asked. 'He should be here.'

Suddenly they heard a small squeaking sound. Looking down, they spotted two little church mice, wriggling their whiskers in dismay.

‘The friar’s not here,’ they told Skippy. ‘He’s been arrested!’ ‘Arrested!’ Skippy cried. ‘How can they arrest him?’ ‘He refused to give the crown any money from the church,’ the mice explained. ‘I think they’re suspicious he’s been getting donations from Robin Hood.’

Skippy squeezed his paw into a fist, annoyed. ‘Well, bow are we supposed to get word to Robin, then?’ he asked. ⁴My mother wants us to tell him something very important.’

The two mice looked at each other. ‘You could go yourselves/¹ one suggested. ‘And while you’re there, you could tell Robin what’s happened to the friar. Maybe he can help somehow?’

Skippy glanced at his sister and Toby, excited *beyond* belief. Another quest—this one possibly actually dangerous. He couldn’t believe his luck!

‘Leave it to us!’ he cried, pounding his chest with his paw. ‘We’ll tell Robin!’

‘But how will we find him?’ asked Toby, being stubbornly practical as always. ‘We don’t know where he is. No-one does!’

Oh, right. Skippy’s enthusiasm deflated a little. But the mice nodded.

‘That we can help with,’ said one mouse. She beckoned for them to follow her down the church aisle and to the altar at the front. There she turned a small crank that opened a secret drawer. Inside was a folded piece of paper.

Skippy drew in a breath. He reached down, picked it up and opened it with shaky paws.

It was a map.

"Does this lead to Robin's camp?" he asked, eyes wide.

'Yes,' said the other mouse. 'We dare not go ourselves. We're too small, and it would take too long. Plus, there are many dangers in the forest for mice? They gave nervous laughs.

Skippy was pretty sure there were dangers in the forest for rabbits too. But he wasn't afraid. Even if he was, he wasn't about to let that fear stop him from his quest.

Toby, however, wasn't quite as convinced. 'Go into Sherwood Forest?' he whispered. 'By ourselves? But it's haunted!' He dipped his head a little farther into his shell. Skippy rolled his eyes.

'We have no choice? he scolded his friend, pushing down his own fears. 'Robin needs us. And there's no-one else!'

Sis grabbed the map. 'Let's do it? she said. 'Robin would do it for us, right?'

She put out her paw. Skippy placed his own on top of it. Toby hesitated for a moment, then joined them. 'All right? he said. 'Let's go get Robin Hood?

'Thank you? the first church mouse said, bowing, 'And please hurry! We don't know what they plan to do to our friar?

'Leave it to us? Skippy said. 'We have it all under control?

They headed out of the abbey. Skippy handed the map to Toby and reached behind his back to grab his bow and a spare arrow—just in case he needed to use it. As they

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walked to the edge of the forest, a wave of excitement rose inside of him.

This was it, a real adventure at last. Why, they would be—

Suddenly something big and burly leapt into their path.

Skippy looked up—way up—and gasped.

It was the sheriff.

‘Now, now,’ the sheriff said, his mouth curling into a wolfish grin. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The children looked at one another. Skippy opened his mouth to speak, to say something—anything! But his mind went completely blank.

‘We’re just off to play a game,’ Sis broke in, giving the sheriff a huge innocent smile.

The wolf narrowed his eyes. ‘A game, you say? In Sherwood Forest? But isn’t that. . . dangerous?’ He stroked his hairy jaw. ‘Surely your mother does not allow you to play games in there. Don’t you know it’s haunted?’

Toby gulped. He tried to slip the map into his shell. But the sheriff caught the movement. ‘What is that?’ he demanded. ‘Are you trying to hide something from me?’

‘Um, no?’ Toby squeaked, not sounding very convincing.

The sheriff reached down and yanked the map from his shell. Skippy cringed.

‘Give that back!’ he cried. ‘It’s not yours!’ As if he expected the sheriff to listen to him.

‘Oh, don’t get your fur in a fluff,’ the sheriff scolded. ‘I’m just taking a look.’ He peered at the map. His eyes widened in surprise. He looked up at the children. ‘Well, this *is* an interesting game now, isn’t it?’

The bunny siblings exchanged horrified glances. This was not good, not good at all.

They had just handed the sheriff of Nottingham a map to Robin’s secret camp.

‘It’s just pretend!’ Sis cried, reaching for the map. ‘I drew it myself!’

‘Of course we don’t *actually* know where Robin is!’ added Skippy, trying to hide the fear in his voice. ‘Obviously no-one would tell *us* something like that! We’re just children!’

The sheriff looked from one of them to the next, his eyebrows furrowed. ‘No, of course not,’ he said slowly. Then he looked down at the map again. ‘Still . . .’

‘Still what?’ Skippy asked, swallowing hard.

The sheriff looked up with a smirk. ‘It’s just that it’s so well done! Just . . . really good work. If you don’t mind, I’d love to show it off to His Majesty. I’m sure he’d just go bananas over it.’

‘Actually, we do mind,’ Sis declared. ‘It’s ours. And we want it back.’

‘My dear girl,’ the sheriff cooed. ‘Don’t you know by now? Everything in this kingdom—from the richest diamonds to the most poorly drawn maps—belongs to His Majesty. And I know he’s going to appreciate your . . . donation.’ He slipped the map into his bag.

Skippy watched, his fur standing on end. This couldn’t be happening! If the sheriff took the map back to Prince John, then

he'd know exactly where Robin and their fathers were hiding. And then they could sneak up on them, catch them unaware and take them prisoner—or worse!

He had to do something. Robin had risked his life to bring them the gold. And now it was up to Skippy to save him.

With a squeal of rage, he dove at the sheriff's bag, dropping his bow and arrow in the process as he managed to unhook it from the sheriff's shoulder and yank it free. The sheriff cried out in alarm, but Skippy didn't pause, hopping as fast as he could down the path towards the forest. As the sheriff lunged after him, Sis and Toby leapt onto his back, trying to bring him down. But the sheriff shook them off and they went flying, slamming hard against the ground. Then he grabbed Skippy's discarded bow and arrow and continued his pursuit.

Skippy pushed through the brush, his heart pounding. As a bunny, he'd always been fast. But the sheriff was a grown wolf—and had much longer legs. Skippy's lungs burned as he tried to suck in much-needed breaths. Going faster and faster, his large feet were a blur of motion.

!!■

But just as he thought he might have a chance to lose the sheriff in the woods, there was a loud whooshing in his ear. His own arrow—now being used against him—pierced the bag and anchored it to the ground. Skippy flew forwards, somersaulting twice before slamming headfirst into a large boulder. For a moment, he saw stars and felt as if he was going to pass out.

By the time his vision cleared, a shadow had crossed over him. The sheriff reached down, pulling out the arrow and collecting his bag.

‘Not wise, little rabbit,’ he scolded, wagging a paw at Skippy. ‘Not wise at all. Why, if you weren’t such a baby, I’d throw you in prison for this!’ His lip curled. ‘But maybe I’ll just arrest your father instead. After all, now I have a map straight to their camp.’

‘Please don’t do this!’ Skippy begged, feeling tears well in his eyes. Everything hurt and he could barely stand. But he did his best, scowling up at the sheriff. ‘Robin is a good fox. He’s trying to help us!’

The sheriff snorted. ‘And he sure seems to be doing a good job of it,’ he said sarcastically, looking down at the

disheveled rabbit. He raised Skippy's bow and made a big show of snapping it in two before slipping his bag over his shoulder and turning to head back to town. Skippy watched helplessly as he went, his heart sinking.

So much for being a hero.

'Are you all right?' Sis asked, coming up behind him. Toby followed close behind. His glasses were broken—one lens smashed.

'I'm fine,' Skippy muttered, looking down at his beloved bow, now broken beyond repair. He felt like crying. Instead, he lifted his chin. 'But Robin won't be if we don't find a way to warn him the sheriff is on his way!'

'We can't warn him,' Toby pointed out as they trudged back towards the abbey. 'We don't have the map anymore. So we don't know how to find him.'

'Know how to find who?'

Skippy looked up at the sound of a new voice. He gasped as he realised it was none other than Maid Marian herself, standing in front of the abbey, a chicken in a blue dress by her side. She looked down at the three of them, concern written in her big brown eyes.

'What's going on?' she asked. 'Did something happen? Are you all right?'

'It's Robin!' Skippy blurted out. 'He needs your help.'

CHAPTLE FORTY-THREE

Marian's pulse quickened. 'He does?' she asked the children. 'Why? What happened?'

She listened as the bunnies and turtle explained, their words tumbling over one another. When they got to the part about the sheriff stealing Friar Tuck's map, her heart sank. It seemed every time she thought things might be getting better, they always got worse.

'Can you help him?' asked the little girl rabbit, who had introduced herself as Sis, her face pleading. 'I'd feel so bad if he were hurt because of us.'

'Don't worry,' Marian assured her. 'I can help. At least I think I can. The sheriff will need to go back to Prince John to get permission to gather his soldiers. He won't be slow

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about it, but I can get a head start. I can reach Robin and the others and let them know what's on its way. Hopefully that'll give them enough time to hide.' She turned to Kluck. 'Shall we?'

'I want to grab a few things in town first,' Kluck said. 'Weapons if I can find any. We may find ourselves in need of them.'

Marian felt a shiver slip down her spine at the idea of real battle. All this combat training she'd had of late, but she'd never had to use it in real life. This time, however, it might be unavoidable.

'All right,' she said. 'Get what you need. But hurry.'

'Leave it to me, dearie,' Kluck said, giving her a salute.

She headed briskly down the path towards the town's main square and shopping district. Once she was gone, Marian turned back to the children.

'Thank you again,' she said. 'You may have just saved a lot of lives. You are truly heroes,' she added with a smile.

'That's exactly what Robin said*.' the boy rabbit—Skippy—cried happily. 'The first time we saved his life*.' Marian cocked her head in question. 'The first time?' 'He was trying to escape the sheriff's men. We hid him in our house. He was really neat. He gave me his bow and his hat*.' Skippy sighed, enthusiasm deflating. 'But that rotten sheriff just broke the bow.'

Marian's eyes widened as *Skippy held up the bow in question. It was definitely Robin's. It even had his initials carved into the wood.*

Well, what do you know? she thought. Maybe her good deeds were rubbing off on him after all. She hoped so, anyway. Because she needed a great big good deed as soon as they dealt with this sheriff snag.

She realised the bunnies were still looking up at her.

'That's a lovely bow,' she assured him. 'And I'm sure we can get it fixed for you. But right now, let's get you back home before your mother worries.' She started to usher them back to town.

But Skippy dug in his heels. 'No way!' he cried. 'We're coming with you! We want to help Robin too!'

Marian felt a pang in her heart as she caught the pleading look on his face. What a bold little bunny. She hated to disappoint him. But there was no way she was bringing children into this mess.

'You're very brave,' she said. 'And I know Robin would appreciate your loyalty. Hmm.' She tapped her finger to her chin. 'Perhaps we should go ask your mother if it's all right for you to join me in battle.'

Skippy's fierce expression faded—so quickly that Marian might have laughed had she not felt bad for him.

'Um,' he started, glancing anxiously at his sister. 'Actually, I think she might want us home for breakfast.'

'Of course,' Marian replied soothingly. 'One never wants to be late for breakfast.' She ruffled his fur. 'Don't worry,' she added. 'I promise to take care of this. Robin and his men will be perfectly fine. And they'll hear the tale of the young heroes who risked their lives to save them.'

Skippy beamed. Toby cheered. Even Sis cracked a sheepish smile.

'Now let's get you home,' Marian said, clapping her paws together. 'I need to get to Robin before it's too late.'

CHAPTER FORTYFOUR

‘How many do we have now?’ Robin asked, looking over at the buckets of fish sitting at the edge of the river.

Little John tugged on his fishing rod, then glanced at the buckets. ‘I’m guessing four dozen,’ he said. ‘Give or take.’

‘So almost fifty fish,’ Robin calculated. ‘That should be enough for every family in Nottingham to have at least one, with a few left over for us.’ He grinned. ‘Not a bad morning’s work, if I do say so myself.’

‘Marian would be so proud,’ John declared, and Robin felt his face heat.

‘It’s not for her,’ he reminded his friend. ‘It’s for the animals.’

‘Mm-hm. Sure. The animals?’

Robin groaned and cast his line back into the water, ignoring John and focusing on the task at hand. Between the fish and the berries his men had been gathering from the forest and the stew John had been simmering on the fire all day, they would be able to provide the animals in town quite the feast.

He had to admit, it felt good to feel useful again. And he was pretty sure the others felt the same. They had been surprisingly excited about the idea of helping those back home. And it made Robin wonder why none of them had thought to do so before. He supposed it had just seemed so overwhelming at the time. They were in survival mode, trying to figure things out. But then Marian had shown them how even small acts could make a big difference.

Maybe they couldn’t save the kingdom or prevent unfair taxes from being collected. But they could fish and chop wood and stir up a good pot of stew—all little things in and of themselves, but together they added up.

Suddenly he felt a small tug on his line. He pulled on the rod, ever so gently, trying to determine whether it was his imagination. But no—there was a new weight to it. Something was on his hook. He winked at Littlejohn.

His bear friend groaned. ‘Another? I swear, Robby, you are the luckiest fox I know.’

Slowly rising to his feet, Robin tugged again, making sure the fish was still on the line. Then he began to reel it in, paw over paw over paw. As the fish realised what was happening, it started to fight to get away. It was strong too— a big one.

‘The citizens of Nottingham are going to dine well tonight,’ Robin cheered as he continued to wrestle with the fish. Little John watched, clasping his paws together and rubbing them with excitement.

Robin had just about gotten the fish to the surface when his ears caught a rustling in the bushes behind him. Startled, he whirled around, managing to lose his grip on his line in the process. Little John dove for it but slipped on the wet dock. His feet shot out from under him and he went headfirst into the pond, along with Robin’s rod.

‘Argh!’ he cried when he emerged. ‘Ofall the miserable—¹

But Robin was no longer listening. He was staring at the figure stepping out of the bushes.

It was Marian.

Robin’s first thought was to hug her, then to tell her what they’d been up to in her name. But the look on her face—flushed and anxious—stopped him.

‘What is it?’ he asked worriedly. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘The sheriff is on his way,’ she told him flatly. ‘He has a map to your camp, and he’s gone to Prince John—probably to secure an army to come in and capture you and your men.’¹ She leaned over, paws on her

legs, trying to catch her breath. “I got here as soon as I could. Put they won’t be far behind?”

Robin cursed under his breath. He glanced over at Little John, who was making his way out of the water, wet reeds sticking to his fur. The bear shook his head. “How did the sheriff get a map?” he asked.

“From Friar Tuck,” Marian told them. “It’s a long story. The point is, they’re on their way. We need to evacuate your camp before they arrive?”

Robin nodded briskly. Then he paused. He glanced at John. “Or . . . ?”

The bear frowned. “Or what? What are you thinking, Robby?”

*“We could stand our ground?” Robin said with a shrug. “Defend our land?”

“Defend it?” Little John repeated, his eyebrows raised. “Have you gone bonkers? Robin’. This is the sheriff, backed by Prince John’s own guard. And we’re only a few outlaws hiding in the woods?”

“Outlaws who fought a war for their king,” Robin reminded him. “It’s not like we’ve never seen battle. Also, we know the forest—they don’t. And they’re counting on the element of surprise. But. . .” He gave Marian a grateful look. “They won’t have it.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Littlejohn mused.

Robin clapped his paws together. “Come. Let’s rally the Merry Men and get into position. We don’t know how much time we have, and we need to be ready.” He turned to Marian, welling with gratitude.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely. “This means more to me than you know.”

‘And that’s just the half of it.’ Kluck stepped out of the bushes, rolling a cart behind her filled with ropes and swords and bows and quivers of arrows. Robin’s jaw dropped. ‘Thought these might come in handy,’ she said with a wink.

‘I’ll say!’ Littlejohn crowed, grabbing a sword and taking a practice swing. ‘With these we might actually stand a chance.’

‘Where did you get these?’ Robin asked, picking up a shiny bow and testing its string.

‘In Nottingham,’ Kluck said. ‘Now that the animals have resources, they’ve been able to open their shops again. The place is bustling. And they do good work too.’

‘That’s great,’ Robin said. And he meant it. Every time he thought he couldn’t be more impressed by Marian . . .

He set down the bow, turning back to the vixen. ‘Again, I thank you,’ he said. ‘But now I think it’s time for you to go home. You don’t want to be here when the fighting begins.’

But Marian shook her head. ‘Not a chance,’ she said. ‘You need every able-bodied animal to fight if you want to win this. That includes Kluck and me.’

Robin raised his eyebrows. ‘I didn’t know you could fight.’

‘I was trained by the best,’ she informed him, shooting a look at Kluck. ‘And Kluck here used to be one of King Richard’s knights. We can be useful, I promise.’

Robin forced himself to nod. He hated the idea of Marian putting herself in danger. But at the same time, he knew better than to argue with the look he saw on her face. It was the same look he’d seen countless times when they were children playing in the castle courtyard—the one that said, *Just try to change my mind.*

She was brave. She always had been. And she was right in this case too. If they were going to have even the slightest chance of winning against Prince John’s soldiers, they’d need everyone working together.

‘All right,’ he forced himself to say. ‘Let’s go find the men. It seems we’ve got a battle to plan.’

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE,

‘Right this way,’ the sheriff ordered his soldiers as they marched into Sherwood Forest just as the sun was

beginning to set. It had taken far too long, in his opinion, to get permission to gather the troops, since Prince John had been “busy” when he first arrived back at the castle, map in paw. He later learned that meant the prince was taking a morning nap. Evidently he’d had a rough night, filled with nightmares of his dear dead mother, and was taking the day off—demanding not to be disturbed for any reason.

< Eventually the sheriff was able to track down Sir Hiss, who was more than eager to give the command to launch the attack in the prince’s name. He allowed the sheriff to take ten of his best rhino soldiers into the forest, with orders to arrest Robin and any outlaws they found with him and bring them back to the castle to stand trial.

‘You must return him alive,’ Sir Hiss had commanded.

‘Prince John wants to deal with him . . . personally.’

It wasn’t the largest army in the world but the best that could be rallied on short notice, and the sheriff needed to get in there before darkness fell and their map was rendered useless.

Besides, he thought as they pushed through the brush, they had the element of surprise on their side. Robin and his outlaws would have no idea what was coming for them. And once they realised what was happening, it’d be too late to launch any kind of counterattack. The fight would be over before it ever really began.

The sheriff grinned wolfishly, glancing down at his map. He pictured the delight on the prince’s face when he marched Nottingham’s most wanted right up to his throne in chains. Why, maybe he’d even get a royal commendation! He imagined the horrified look on Maid Marian’s face when she realised her precious outlaw had been nabbed. It made him smile. That would take her down a peg or two.

The rhinos at the front of the march stopped suddenly. The ones following them slammed into their backs, then cried out

in protest. The sheriff frowned.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked. ‘Did I tell you to stop?’

The head rhino gripped his spear tightly, his eyes darting around the forest. ‘I thought I heard a noise,’ he said worriedly. ‘It sounded like a ghost.’ He turned to the others, giving them knowing looks. ‘I heard there were deadly ghosts in Sherwood Forest, you know.’

The other rhinos looked a little frightened at this. They began to whisper among themselves.

‘I don’t want to get killed by a ghost!’ cried one.

The sheriff rolled his eyes. He reached up, grabbing a tree branch and shaking it. It groaned loudly. He gave the rhinos a pointed look.

‘Your ghost?’ he asked, raising an eyebrow.

The rhinos looked at one another, not entirely convinced. For being so large, they weren’t especially bright. ‘Come on,’ the sheriff commanded. ‘Keep moving. It gets dark early this time of year. It’ll be harder to fight if we can’t see.’

They continued to clomp through the forest, their heavy steps far too loud for the sheriff’s liking—especially from this captain fellow, who kept slapping his axe against the trees as he went, for absolutely no reason whatsoever.

‘Do you mind?’ the sheriff demanded. ‘We’re trying to launch a surprise attack here. The way you’re clattering on, they’re going to hear us a mile away!’

The captain bowed his head. ‘Sorry, m’lord,’ he said. ‘I’ll try not to—*OOMPH!*’*

He bellowed as he tripped over a log and went flying. He landed hard on the ground. The other rhinos cried out in alarm, all trying to help him up at once.

The sheriff groaned. Amateurs! The lot of them!

Suddenly his ears picked up a strange sound in the distance, almost like a whistle. He tried to tell himself it was just more tree branches

shifting—the forest’s “ghosts.” But then it came again, and he wasn’t sure.

He motioned for the rhinos to stop for a moment. ‘Be quiet,’ he said. ‘I thought I heard something.’

‘Ghosts?’ asked the rhino in the rear. The sheriff didn’t bother to answer. He looked down at his map. ‘We’re getting dose,’ he told them. ‘It’s just over this hill here and—’

WHOOSH!

The sheriff froze. What was that?

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

He glanced to his left, his eyes widening to see an arrow sticking out of a tree—an arrow he was positive hadn’t been there a moment before.

‘They’re shooting at us! Take cover!’ cried the captain, far too loudly. Though at this point it didn’t seem to matter.

For it seemed their surprise attack wasn’t going to be much of a surprise after all.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

‘Get them! Go, go, go!’

The camp burst to life as Littlejohn gave the signal that the sheriff and his men were near. The archers rose from behind their boulders, releasing their arrows, while high above in the trees, others readied their buckets of acorns.

A now disguised Marian glanced over at Kluck, grinning nervously as she held on to one side of a thick rope and her lady-

in-waiting, who was dressed as one of the Merry Men, held the other. This was it. Were they ready?

The rhino soldiers charged down the hill. The trees rained acorns, pelting the rhinos' heads. They cried out in alarm, stumbling over the tiny seeds. When they blundered

past Marian and Kluck, the two lifted their rope tripping the soldiers and sending them careening to the ground.

Marian shot Kluck a grin, then dropped the rope and ran towards the barrels of mud they'd gathered from the river. With the help of Otto, they started throwing wads of mud at the soldiers' faces as they tried to scramble to their feet.

The rhinos bellowed in a mixture of rage and frustration, blindly stumbling towards the river to get the mud out of their eyes. But when they arrived, Much and Allan-a-Dale were ready for them, kicking each of them into the water in turn. The lively current scooped them up, dragging them downstream as they screamed and flailed with frustration. Marian couldn't help giggling at the scene.

But then she turned back to the battle just in time to find a large armoured rhino storming in her direction, wielding a sharp-looking sword. He was at least double her size and had muscles bulging out from his armour. Frightened, she tried to back away but only managed to trip over a bucket of berries and fall to the ground.

She squeaked in alarm as she looked up to find the rhino looming above her, his sword raised and ready. Fear pounded in her heart as her mind raced and a terrifying reality sank in. Was this it? After everything she'd been through, would he just mercilessly cut her down where she lay? She looked desperately for Kluck or Robin or anyone else—but they were all busy fighting their own battles. And she had no weapon of her own. She wondered if she could manage to jump on him and scratch him with her claws, hard enough to do some damage at least, before he struck his fatal blow.

But to her surprise, before she could make a move, the rhino lifted his helmet. Marian's eyes bulged from her head

as she realised who it was. Joffrey winked at her, then pulled the helmet back over his face and turned his back as if he'd never seen her.

‘We’re outnumbered!’ he cried loudly. ‘They’ve got an entire army. And there’s ghosts too!’ he added, waving his arms in the air as if he were petrified. ‘Retreat! As your captain, I demand you retreat. Before it’s too late!’

He began running through the thick of the battle. The remaining rhinos looked up to watch, then, to Marian’s delight, began stumbling in his direction, trying to get away.

The sheriff stepped in, stopping Joffrey in his tracks. ‘Stand your ground, you idiot!’ he scolded him. ‘Don’t you see they’re just using silly tricks? You have swords! Cut them down!’

But he might as well have saved his breath. His soldiers—what was left of *them—kept following Joffrey, running in the other direction, away from the camp. One smaller rhino did try to turn around and fight but was quickly cut off by Kluck, who pointed her sword at his belly.

‘You want some of this?’ she asked sweetly. ‘If not, I suggest you run?’

He quickly took her suggestion and did just that.

Now the only one who remained was the sheriff. He bellowed in rage, waving his sword in the air. ‘Cowards!’ he cried.

‘You’re all a bunch of cowards—

He stopped short, realising he was surrounded. The Merry Men circled him, swords and clubs raised, menacing looks on their faces. The sheriff’s scowl seemed to fall off his face, replaced by a look of pure fear.

‘Now, now, boys,’ he said, holding up his paws. ‘I’m only here for Robin. The rest of you can go free! I’m sure the prince would pardon you if you could just give up the fox?’

‘Not a chance,’ growled Otto, holding up his sword.

‘We’d sooner lose our lives than turn in our friend,’ Much blustered.

‘Something you wouldn’t understand. Since I’m guessing you don’t have any friends,’ added Will Scarlet.

The sheriff looked hurt by this. Then his expression ‘morphed into anger again. ‘You stupid animals,’ he cried.

‘You’re *going to pay for this. You’re all* going to pay for *this!*’

And with that, he pushed his way out of the circle, stomping in the other direction. Little John raised his sword, ready to chase after him, but Robin laid a paw on his arm.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Let him go home and look Prince John in the face and tell him he failed again.’ He shot a grin at Marian. ‘I want everyone to know that, once again, his royal phoniness has been *outfoxed*.”¹

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The camp came alive with laughter and cheers as everyone returned from their posts victorious. They were slapping one another on the backs, shaking paws and wings, hugging even—all with huge grins on their faces.

‘We did it!’ Will Scarlet cheered, dancing around the firepit and waving a paw in the air. ‘Did you see them run?’

‘A few of them had to swim!’ joked Much, wiping the mud from his shell.

Littlejohn set down his sword, his eyes shining brightly. ‘That was fun,’ he declared. ‘I can’t remember the last time I had so much fun.’

‘Did you see the look on the sheriff’s face when we surrounded him?’ Otto asked, limping over to hug Marian. ‘Allan here will be singing of it for years to come.’

‘I already have the first verse’ Allan-a-Dale announced, grabbing his lute and strumming a chord.

Oh, the sheriff came to Sherwood land, But a cleverfox done foiled his plans. Now she’s the hero of this band, The lovely Lady Marian.

The animals broke out in applause. Marian felt her face heat. ‘I was only the messenger,’ she protested. ‘It was your friend Joffrey, the rhino, who ordered the others to retreat. He’s the real hero.’

‘Ah, that Joffrey is a good lad,’ Robin agreed. ‘But I’m sorry, you are still the true hero of the realm, whether you like it or not!’

‘The true hero of the realm!’ chorused the others as Robin grabbed her and swung her around. She screeched in protest but then laughed.

‘You are all far too kind,’ she said. ‘Honestly, anyone would have done the same.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ argued Littlejohn. ‘Not many these days that will stick out their necks for their fellow animals. Not since that phony king of England took the throne.’ The animals booed and jeered. Allan-a-Dale strummed his lute again, launching into a raucous version of the song that had first made him an outlaw.

He rules the roost.

He sucks his thumb.

We’ll all be poor when he is done.

*But for now, we’ll all make fun
Of the phony king of England.*

Soon other animals had grabbed their instruments and joined in on the song, while Little John sang not quite in tune but made up for it in volume and enthusiasm. The rest of them

danced around the fire, clapping their paws and stomping their feet.

It was a real party.

Marian glanced over at Robin only to find him watching her with steady eyes. "When he caught her looking, he smiled goofily and her heart melted. It was nice to see him so relaxed—so happy.

And he was about to be even happier, she realised, once she told him the good news about Richard. Which she hadn't shared yet, not wanting to distract him before the battle. But now? She found she couldn't wait another minute.

, - 'Can I talk to you?' she asked. 'Alone?'

Robin nodded, catching the serious look on her face. He scrambled to his feet and excused himself to the others, before leading her away from the camp and into the dark forest. Once they were alone, Robin turned to her, his eyes burning bright in the moonlight.

'Thank you,' he whispered. The laughter was gone and his voice was rich with sincerity. 'What you did . . . it was so brave. And so dangerous. Honestly, it was too much of a risk. What if they had seen you? What if they had recognised you?'

Marian's lip curled. 'Then I guess I'd be an outlaw too.'

Robin scowled. 'That's not funny.'

She levelled her eyes at him. 'Do you see me laughing?'

'No. But. . .'

She waved him off. 'Forget all that. I have something important to tell you. And I won't lie—it's going to come as a big shock. It's good news. But I'm afraid it will also make you very angry. You have to promise me you'll keep your

composure. Do not run off half-cocked, trying to be a hero. We need to be smart about this. We need to work together.'

'All right!' Robin said, holding up his paws. 'I agree. Also, I'm very intrigued.'

She drew in a breath. *Here goes nothing.* 'Well,' she said. 'Do you remember the night at the Rose and Thorn Inn?'

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Robin froze. He swallowed Hard, trying to keep his legs from buckling under him. Suddenly all the glory of victory seemed to fade into the darkness as he was brought tumbling back to the worst night of his life.

The night he'd failed his king.

'Of course I remember,' he said roughly. 'How could I ever forget something like that?' Then he frowned. 'But how do you know about the inn?'

'Joffrey told me,' she said. 'He told me everything about that night. The king's murder, your becoming outlaws because of it. But it didn't make any sense to me,' she added. 'Sol decided to check it out myself.'

'You what?'

‘Kluck and I went there. We met with the squirrel owners and had them take us to the room where Richard slept that night. The one he shared with you.’ She looked at him pointedly.

Robin cringed. It was as if she’d taken a knife, stabbed him in the gut and twisted it. But he was pretty sure a knife would have hurt less. He sank down onto a nearby boulder, scrubbing his face with his paws as the memories flooded back—memories he’d been attempting to suppress for months, now stomping through his brain like an unstoppable parade.

‘I was hoping to spare you this,’ he said softly. ‘You were already suffering over your uncle’s death. I didn’t want to make it worse—by telling you it was my fault.’

‘No! Robin—’

‘Don’t try to make me feel better,’ he interrupted, angrily cutting her off. ‘I was meant to stand guard over the king as he slept. But somehow I fell asleep on the job— something I never do. When I awoke, I heard voices. I realised someone was in the room. But how they got in there, I don’t know. I had latched the door and it was still closed.’

‘Robin, listen—’

No! he cried. Let me get this out. It’s been eating away at me too long.’ He raked a paw through his fur. ‘At

that point, 1 heard a moan—the king was clearly in pain. I looked over to see hooded animals surrounding him, raising knives. 1 tried to go to him, to stop them, but my legs felt like they were still asleep—they weren't working—and 1 realised 1 must have been drugged. 1 fell back to the floor, passing out again. When 1 awoke in the morning, 1 saw that the king had been stabbed in the heart and was dead.'

He felt tears well in his eyes. 'I'm sorry, Marian,' he murmured. 'But it's all my fault. 1 was the one who let the king die.'

And there it was—the confession that had been weighing on him like an elephant stepping on his stomach all these months. It should have felt good to voice it at last. But instead, it only tore at his heart as he relived the night all over again—the feeling of helplessness, of watching something happen that he couldn't control.

'Robin, he's not dead,' Marian blurted out.

Robin's head jerked up. 'What?' he cried. 'Of course he's dead'. 1 saw the wound'.'

'Wounds can be faked. And they likely drugged him, just like you, so he would appear dead at first glance. After all, they needed witnesses so there would be no doubt of his demise. But when they took him away the next morning? He was still alive.'

⁴I don't understand.' Robin's heart was thumping as an inane hope rose in his gut, even as he tried to squash it. Could it be true? Could it really be true? It was almost too much to bear.

‘It was Sir Hiss’s idea.’ She reached into her satchel and pulled out a telltale snake skin. ‘We found it in a secret passageway at the inn.’ She shrugged. ‘It makes perfect sense if you think about it. Sir Hiss knew that if Richard were to come back, he’d be out of a job. He had to stop him somehow.’

Robin growled. ‘And Prince John just went along with it all?’

‘Not exactly,’ Marian corrected. ‘Sir Hiss wanted to actually kill Richard. Take him out for good. But John refused to accept that, even after Sir Hiss told him all sorts of lies about his brother. Turns out, John’s a terrible, greedy lion—but not a murderer.’

‘So Richard is alive?’ Robin struggled to get back to the point. ‘Where is he now?’

‘We believe he’s being held prisoner beneath the castle,’ Marian explained, giving him a rueful look. ‘He’s been there all along.’

Anger rose inside of Robin, fast and furious and out of control. He scrambled back to his feet, squaring his shoulders and lifting his snout. ‘I’m going to get him!’ he declared. ‘He will not spend another night in that hole!’

‘Stop’.¹ Marian placed a paw on his chest. ‘Remember what you promised. You dash in there like a hero and you will be caught and thrown in an even deeper prison than our king.’¹

Robin cringed. She was right, of course. How was it Marian was always so sensible?

‘So what do we do?’¹ he asked. ‘Do you have a plan?’¹

‘I do,’¹ she said. ‘But first, let’s talk to your men and tell them what we know. We’re going to need their help if we want to

make this work.¹

Robin nodded. 'I'm sure the others will want to help. They're all still loyal to their king.'

'I was hoping you'd say that,' said Marian. 'Because we're going to need all the help we can get.'

Robin shook his head. 'Marian, you never cease to amaze me,' he whispered. He met her eyes with his own, this time allowing himself to get lost in their depths. 'I had all but given up. But you have given me—given all of us— new hope. New life.'

'You can thank me later,¹ she said with a small smile. 'Right now, we have a rescue to plan.'

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

There was no laughter this time as Marian addressed Robin's Merry Men—only horror, disbelief and then anger. That was to be expected, of course. But Robin reminded his men that this was actually good news—the best possible news.

‘If Richard is truly alive,’ he told them, ‘and we can rescue him and restore him as king, well, we’ll all be able to go home at last.’ He grinned. ‘I mean, if you want to, that is. I know how much you all love sleeping on the forest floor...’

They did laugh at this. Little John threw a carrot at Robin's head. ‘Won't miss your cooking, that's for sure!’ he teased.

Robin rolled his eyes. ‘Yeah, yeah,’ he groaned. Then he grew serious again.

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‘I won’t lie to you,’ he Said. ‘There will be much risk involved in this rescue. And if we fail and are caught, we will be thrown in prison—or worse.’ He cleared his throat. ‘This is a fight I’ve decided to join. But I would understand if any of you chose to hang back. You must make the right decisions for yourselves. It’s not the kind of thing someone should choose for you.’

‘Well, I’m in,’ declared Otto, rising to his feet. ‘My foot’s a lot better, and I’m ready to use it.’

‘Me too,’ agreed Father Rabbit. ‘I’d do anything to be reunited with my family.’

‘I just want to see the look on that cowardly lion’s face when his brother strolls up to him and grabs that oversized crown off his head,’ added Littlejohn. ‘Count me in!’

Marian watched in excitement as, one by one, each animal stood up and declared his willingness to fight for their king. By the time they were done, there was no-one left sitting down. And everyone wore looks of hope and excitement on their faces.

‘Well, then,’ Robin said with a grin. ‘That was easy.’ He clapped his paws. ‘Now, sit down, the lot of you. Marian has a plan.’

They all settled in, looking up at her expectantly. Marian cleared her throat, suddenly feeling a little nervous. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘As you know, in three days there will

be a great archery tournament being held outside the castle grounds. Most everyone will be there—including a lot of the guards, who want to compete. Which means the castle won't be as secure, making it the best time to sneak in and try to find Richard.'

Robin nodded. 'This is good,' he said. 'This is really good.' He turned to his men. 'Now who wants to do what?'

They worked into the night, discussing strategy, placement, roles. Some would stay on the field as lookouts, keeping an eye on the guards. Robin and Marian would sneak into the castle using the secret passageways to locate Richard and set him free. Meanwhile, Little John and Lady Kluck Would work to keep the prince and Sir Hiss distracted.

Each animal would play a part. Each animal would help save the kingdom.

By the time they had finished, it was very late. They were all exhausted from the long, difficult day. One by one, they began to nod off, falling asleep wherever they lay, sometimes with a cup still in their paw.

But Marian couldn't sleep. She was too wound up. And when she saw Robin slipping away into the night, she got up and followed him.

She found him standing by the river, lit by a pale silvery moon. He was staring down into the water with a look on

his face that nearly broke her heart. On instinct, she stepped towards him. Her foot came down on a twig and he startled at the sound, then relaxed as he realised it was only her.

‘Couldn’t sleep?’ he asked.

She shook her head, joining him at the river. ‘You?’

‘No.’ He sighed deeply. ‘My mind won’t turn off. I just keep thinking about all this time wasted in the woods. While my king suffered in a cell.’

‘You couldn’t have known,’ she reminded him. ‘You thought he was dead.’

‘And yet I did nothing.’ he cried. ‘Even if he had been dead, I should have sought out his killers. Or helped those left behind as you did. Instead, I hid in the woods like a coward. I will never forgive myself for that.’

‘Robin—’

‘Marian, I am so sorry,’ Robin said. He dropped to his knees, putting his paws together, as if in prayer. ‘I was wrong—so wrong. And I beg of you to forgive me.’

Marian didn’t know what to say. She just looked at him for a moment, then sighed, reaching down and pulling him back to his feet.

‘You were not a coward,’ she scolded. ‘You did what you thought was best for your men. You kept them safe. No-one—especially not your king—would ever blame you for that.’

Robin bowed his head. ‘You’re too kind, Marian. I don’t deserve you?’

‘Well, lucky for you I’ve always had a soft spot for outlaws,’ she teased. ‘And I’m very glad we’re back to fighting on the same side?’

Agreed,’ Robin declared. ‘I cannot wait for justice to be served. For that cowardly lion and snivelling snake to get what they deserve?’

Marian felt a rush of emotion at his words, the sincerity she heard in his voice. *This* was the Robin she remembered from her childhood, the one she’d first fallen for so many years earlier.

The one she was falling for all over again.

She put her arms around him, pulling him into an embrace. For a moment, he just *stood* there, as *if* in shock. Then he lifted his own arms, wrapping them around her body. He squeezed her so tightly that, *for* a moment, she felt she couldn’t breathe. But somehow she didn’t mind.

‘I missed this,’ Robin whispered in her ear.

‘I missed *you*’ she whispered back.

They stood there for a moment, not moving, simply wrapped in each other’s arms, as if there were no-one else in the world. And for the first time since she’d come home, Marian felt a stirring of hope deep inside. It wasn’t going to be easy. And it might very well cost them their lives in the end.

But at least they would be together.

After a time, Robin pulled away, smiling bashfully.

‘I have an idea,’ he said. ‘A small . . . addition to our plan.’ She cocked her head in question. ‘What is it?’

‘Well, there’s still the matter of the prize, right? At the tournament? The one they’re giving away?’

She swallowed hard. ‘You mean the golden arrow?’

He shook his head slowly. Her breath hitched as she realised exactly what he was talking about—the *other* prize.

‘Well, what do you suggest we do about that?’ she murmured, her heart beating fast and furious.

Robin leaned forwards and whispered his plan in her ear. Her mouth curved into a smile.

‘I like it,’ she said. ‘In fact, I like it a lot.’

CHAPTER FIFTY

It was the night before the big archery tournament, and since John couldn't sleep a wink. He tossed and turned in his giant feather bed, with its mountains of pillows and blankets, his mind alive with visions of what was sure to be a most excellent day. Animals from around the realm would gather to pay homage to him and his rule.

And if they were lucky, they could take down that traitorous thief for good.

John was still furious about all the failed attempts to capture Robin Hood. How could one fox be so slippery? Every day more and more gold and food went missing from the castle and ended up in the neighbouring towns, and yet no-one seemed to have any idea how it was being done.

Even with a blasted map leading straight to Robin's lair, that ridiculous sheriff hadn't been able to take him in, claiming the fox had some kind of magical forest army protecting him from harm.

Honestly, how could Prince John be expected to command respect from his subjects when they were all in the streets singing the praises of the fox trying to subvert his rule?

It was enough to make a lion want to give up the crown altogether retreat to private life, where he could go back to sleeping till noon. That was an idea he had mentioned to Sir Hiss several times. But the snake wouldn't hear of it.

Sire,’ he’d say, ‘just wait until the tournament. We’ll capture that fox and we’ll show everyone who’s in charge. No-one will dare disrespect you or your rule ever again.’

Prince John hoped he was right.

In the morning, he dressed in his royal best: a sky blue ermine-trimmed robe with a matching flouncy blue shirt that used to belong to his brother. At some point he’d have to have new clothes made, ones that fit him a little better. But for now, these would do, along with his crown, of course—to show the kingdom who was in charge.

He ate a hearty breakfast, accompanied by Maid Marian, whom he’d allowed out of her room for the day, seeing how she had an important part to play in his game. She sat at the

PRINCESS OF THIEVES

table with him, listlessly staring down at her food and not taking a bite.

‘What’s wrong, my dear?’ he asked. ‘Aren’t you excited about today? You’ll be meeting your future husband!’

He knew she wasn’t thrilled at this, at least at first. And to be honest, he didn’t really want her to leave the castle as someone’s bride either. Sir Hiss might have thought it was a good idea to get rid of her—he didn’t seem to like her too much for some reason—but John honestly enjoyed having her around, even if she could get a little bossy at times. It was nice to have someone close to his own rank to talk to or play badminton with. In truth, she reminded him a little of his mother.

He just hoped Robin would come and win the tournament. He’d be disqualified, of course, when he was arrested, which meant Marian could then remain at the castle as John’s ward. It was the perfect plan.

‘I’m very excited,’ Marian said, looking up at him with glassy eyes. ‘But I’m afraid I have a rather sore tummy this morning. I

think I ate something bad last night. And I've been throwing up ever since.'

'Oh, dear.' Prince John frowned. 'Well, that's not good at all!'

'I know!' she moaned. 'The last thing I want is to throw up in front of the crowd of nobles. Who would want me as a

bride then? Someone so unladylike!' She let out a small cry of dismay.

Prince John patted her on the shoulder. 'Look, if you're feeling like you will be sick, just head back to the castle to... deal with it. And when you're done, return. Then no- one has to see.'

She smiled gratefully at him. 'That is such a wise plan,' she said. 'Thank you so much for thinking of it!'

'Oh,' he said, waving her off with a grin. She really was a sweet girl. 'It's nothing. I have so many wise plans. Sometimes they just come to me out of the blue!'

'Well, you have made me feel so much better. And now I best go prepare myself. I want to look extra beautiful today. For . . . meeting my new husband.'

'Of course, my dear. Take as long as you need. I will see you out on the field when you are ready.'

He watched her get up and walk out of the room, then turned back to his breakfast. When he had finished, his guards escorted him to the field, where everyone else was already gathered for the event. The trumpets sounded, announcing his royal arrival, and everyone cheered loudly and shouted, 'Long live the king!' He smiled, feeling pretty good about things, and made his way over to the grand pavilion, where his throne had been set up for him to watch the event.

When he reached the pavilion, he found Sir Hiss waiting for him. ‘Everything is in place, sire,’ the snake informed him. ‘We have guards surrounding the perimeter. Once we identify Robin, they’ll close in. This time there will be no chance to escape.’

‘Excellent,’ Prince John said, settling down on his throne. ‘I cannot wait to see the look on that sneaky traitor’s face when he realises he’s been outwitted by my cleverness!’

Sir Hiss flicked his tongue. ‘Yes, sire,’ he said with a grin. ‘It will surely be a sight to be—’

‘Greetings!’

Sir Hiss was interrupted by a large bear stepping up to the pavilion. He was dressed in a fancy purple suit that unfortunately looked a few sizes too small, and he wore a monocle.

‘Ah!’ he exclaimed, a big smile on his face. ‘My esteemed sovereign lord of the realm!’ He bowed low. ‘The head man himself! You’re beautiful!’

Prince John beamed, liking the bear already. ‘He has style!’ he said as an aside to Sir Hiss, who looked a little doubtful. ‘Come,’ he added, patting the seat at his side. ‘Sit down awhile and take a load off.’

‘Thanks, PJ,’ the bear said, plopping down on the seat, which was, unfortunately, still occupied by Sir Hiss. The snake let out an offended screech, and the bear reached under his own bottom to grab the snake by the neck and yank him out.

‘Sorry, buster!’ he said, not seeming too apologetic. Prince John had to stifle a giggle at the offended look on his advisor’s face.

‘Buster?’ the snake spat. ‘My name is Sir Hiss. I’m His Majesty’s royal advisor.’ He scowled at the bear. ‘And who, pray tell, might you be?’

Sir Reginald, duke of Chutney, at your service,' the bear replied jovially. 'I'm here to watch the tournament and to see who wins the paw of Lady Marian.' He elbowed Prince John in the side. 'She's a lovely lass, isn't she?'

Sir Hiss frowned, turning to the empty chair on the other side of Prince John. 'Speaking of her loveliness,' he said. 'Where is she?'

Prince John sighed. 'She has a bit of tummy trouble, it seems. She'll be along in a bit.'

Sir Hiss frowned. 'No,' he said. 'That won't do. We need her out here.'

'Very well.' Prince John rose to his feet. 'I'll go fetch her.'

'But sire! The tournament!' cried Sir Reginald, * 341

waving his arm and accidentally knocking John back onto his throne.

'Watch what you're doing!' Sir Hiss scolded. 'That's the king, you know!'

'I'm sorry, Your Majesty,' Reginald said. 'I'm a big oaf, aren't I? It's just that everyone's been waiting for you to arrive. If you leave again, they'll have to halt all activities and wait for your return.' He shrugged. 'You are so important, after all.'

Prince John nodded. 'Very true,' he mused. 'I am important.'

'Perhaps I should go . . .' Sir Hiss suggested.

'No need. I can do it!' cried a new voice.

Prince John turned to find that Lady Kluck had stepped up to the pavilion. He sighed in relief. 'Wonderful,' he said. 'Tell her we need her out here. She'll understand why.'

'Of course, sire. Just leave it to me.' Kluck curtsied, then scurried off.

Sir Hiss frowned. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to *send* someone else?’ he asked. ‘I mean someone—’

‘Bah! She seems like a competent lady to me!’ Sir Reginald declared, slapping the snake on the back so hard he almost fell off his perch. ‘You worry too much, buster. Now let’s watch ourselves a tournament.’

‘Yes, Sir Hiss. Watch the tournament!’ Prince John

admonished, turning *back to the events on the field, which weft just getting underway*. He *rubbed his paws* together. ‘This is a grand moment, after all. A day for the history books!’

The day they would bring down Robin Hood at last.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE.

‘Wow, it’s been a while since I’ve stepped through this door,’ Robin remarked as he stood on the edge of the beach by the secret entrance to the castle. ‘Remember how I used to sneak up and collect you from your room at night so we could look at the moon?’

‘Oh, I remember all right,’ Marian said with a shy smile, thinking back to those days. ‘I also recently found out Lady Kluck knew all about these little adventures. And here we thought we were being so sneaky!’

‘She’s a good egg, that one,’ Robin said with a smile. ‘Even if she was a bit hard on me back in the day. I know it was only because she cared so much for you.’

‘There’s no-one more loyal than Kluck. I don’t know how I would have managed any of this without her,’ Marian declared.

Together they entered the dark passageway and headed down the familiar corridor. When they reached the stairs that lead up to Marian’s chambers, the familiar moaning sound rose to her ears. She stopped short, listening hard.

‘There it is,’ she said. ‘Do you hear?’

Robin nodded solemnly. ‘It sounds like someone’s in pain.’

‘I used to think it was a ghost,’ she confessed, feeling sheepish. She’d walked by this spot so many times and never once gone to investigate the source. She hoped her uncle would forgive her.

Robin laid a paw on her arm. ‘It’s all right,’ he said softly. ‘We’re here now.’

They passed the stairs and headed farther into the castle, through a passageway she hadn’t taken before. It was musty and filled with cobwebs—Lady Kluck hadn’t cleaned out this section—and Marian stifled a sneeze.

As they walked, the corridor began to slope downwards, deeper into the bowels of the castle. At one point it began to spiral, round and round, until Marian started to feel a little dizzy—her pretend tummy troubles realised. But she

forced herself to press on, keeping an ear out for the occasional moans to ensure they were headed in the right direction.

At one point a spider crawled over her foot and she had to swallow back a shriek. But Robin reached out, slipping his paw into her own, just as he had so many years earlier. And once again it made her feel so much better.

Finally they reached a set of steep stairs leading down into the darkness. Robin motioned for Marian to stop, then put a paw to his lips and pointed down at a flicker of light below. Someone was down there. A moment later, another moan rose from the depths, this one sounding much closer than the others.

‘This must be it,’ Robin whispered. ‘We need to be quiet?’

Marian nodded, and together they began to tiptoe down the steps, following the light. Soon they could make out voices below. They seemed to be arguing.

‘Quit yer bellyaching, Trigger!’ cried one. ‘Or I’ll quit it for you?’

Marian glanced at Robin. It was the vulture guards!

‘Oh, shut it, Nutsy,’ Trigger shot back. ‘I have good reason to complain! I mean, we’re stuck down here on babysitting duty when the tournament’s goin’ on. How is that fair? What if I wanted to enter?’

‘You lookin’ to get married?’ teased Nutsy. ‘To the sweet Marian?’

‘Bah! I just want that golden arrow. You know how much that thing is worth? We could retire from this lousy guard business!’

‘You actually think you could win, Trigger? I mean, you’re good. But not Robin Hood good.’

‘You don’t know that! I bet I could. In fact, I should go up there right now and demand my place’.

They heard a shuffling sound—someone getting up. Robin shot a look at Marian. She pressed her back against the wall. A moment later they caught a flash of torchlight. The guard—Trigger—was on his way up. In a moment, they’d be in his sights. And they didn’t have time to run all the way back upstairs.

‘What are we going to do?’ Marian whispered.

‘Just stand back,’ Robin said. ‘I’ll take him.’

‘I can help too’.

‘No. You wait for the other one. He’s bound to come running once he hears his partner being attacked.’

Suddenly the torch lit their faces. ‘What in tarnation?’ cried Trigger. ‘Nutsy’. Get up here! We have intruders!’

He raised his crossbow. But Robin was too quick, knocking it from his wings. Then Robin kicked out, sending the vulture tumbling down the stairs.

‘Now!’ he cried to Marian.

They ran down the stairs into a small chamber below. Trigger was on the floor, screaming, ‘Get ’em, Nutsy! Get ’em.’

Nutsy raised his axe. Marian pulled her sword from her belt. Her heart beat fast. This was it—the moment Kluck had trained her for.

She circled the vulture warily, waiting for him to make the first move. He was quicker than Kluck and smaller too— not as

easy of a target. As he charged towards her, she leapt back, and he came away with a scrap of fabric from her dress but luckily none of her flesh.

‘Marian!’ Robin cried, lunging towards them. But Trigger grabbed him from behind, yanking him back. He tried to wrestle away from the guard, but Trigger held strong. And Marian knew, at least for now, she was on her own.

She danced around Nutsy, trying to remember all Kluck had taught her. But her brain felt like mush. This was a lot different than when they were practicing. And there would be no second round if she failed. One wrong move and it would all be over—no saving her uncle, no saving the kingdom.

No saving her life.

Her eyes steadied on Nutsy’s face, waiting for him to

give something away. He jabbed forwards again and she managed to parry with her sword. But he only danced back, readying for another blow. He was quick, smart, nimble. And she wasn't seeing any mistakes. She began to get worried. And her arms were aching from the weight of the sword.

Robin, meanwhile, was cornered by Trigger, who'd retrieved his crossbow and was pointing it at the outlaw's face. 'Please,' the fox said, smiling at the vulture. 'Let's talk about this. Maybe we could work something out?'

It was then Marian got an idea. It was risky, of course. But it might be her only chance. She had to do something, after all. Robin was running out of time.

She held her paws above her head. 'I surrender!' she declared. 'Please don't hurt me!'

'Marian, no!' Robin cried, looking horrified. 'What are you doing?'

But Nutsy grinned. 'Now that's more like it,' he snarled, taking a step towards her. 'Lower your sword.'

She did, dropping it on the ground. It hit the stones with a loud, echoing clatter. The vulture stepped towards her, pinning her to the wall, his axe at her chest.

'Now I'm not going to hurt you,' he said slowly. 'Just stay still and . . .'

She shot out her foot, kicking him as hard as she could.

'Argh!' he cried, flailing backwards, the axe falling from his wing. Marian dove towards it, scooped it up in her paw and placed it right at his throat.

Nutsy cried out for Trigger. But Robin had already managed to overpower the other vulture. He dragged him to Marian and held both vultures tight as she tied them together with the rope they'd brought and then secured that to a chain on the wall.

'You can't get away with this!' Trigger cried. 'Prince John will make you pay!'

‘Actually,’ Marian said, smiling at Robin, ‘I think he’s the one with a payment due.’

CHAPTLR FIFTY-TWO

After “borrowing” the keys from Trigger, Marian and Robin headed down the corridor to the locked door at the end. They heard the moaning still, louder than ever, and Marian found herself drawing in a nervous breath, not sure what they would find on the other side. Richard had been injured, then trapped for months. Who knew what state he’d be in when they opened the door?

But he was alive, she told herself. That was all that mattered.

Robin slid the key into the lock and Marian pushed on the door. It was heavy and rusted and groaned in protest as it grudgingly opened, revealing a dimly lit chamber beyond.

They looked at each other—this was it—then stepped

inside, swords raised and ready, just in case there were more guards lurking.

‘Where is he?’¹ Marian asked worriedly, looking around.

The room was sparsely furnished—a rickety chair, a small stained table, a cot covered in a ratty blanket pushed up against one wall. There were no windows at all, and it smelled very bad. It wasn’t an actual prison, but it was close enough—certainly not quarters for a king.

Suddenly there was a roar. A lion leapt into their path, baring his teeth. They screamed and backed away, holding up their paws in surrender.

‘It’s us, m’lord!’ Robin cried. ‘It’s only us!’

The lion stopped in his tracks, staring at them in disbelief. ‘Robin?’ he whispered. ‘Marian?’

He was barely recognizable—filthy, scrawny, unkempt. But it was definitely him, Marian realised, tears springing to her eyes.

Her uncle. Standing there. Alive.

‘Oh, Uncle!’ she cried, running to him and throwing her arms around him. ‘We thought you were dead!’

‘Marian,’ Richard whispered, his voice rich with disbelief. ‘Am I dreaming? Is it really you?’

‘It’s really me,’ she assured him, her voice choking on the words as she squeezed him in a huge hug.

He hugged her back. His arms were weaker than she

remembered, but he still possessed an inner strength. And she felt a rumble erupt from his chest—a lion’s purr. It made her heart soar.

‘I’m so sorry, Uncle,’ she whispered. ‘But I’m so glad you’re alive.’

After a time, Richard pulled away from their embrace.

His eyes were wet, shining with both tears and gratitude. ‘How did you find me?’ he asked.

‘It’s a long story,’ Robin said. ‘But you can thank your niece for all of it.’ He looked at Marian with affection. ‘She never gave up on you.’

Richard smiled. ‘That sounds like my Marian,’ he said.

Marian felt herself blush. She clapped her paws together. ‘There’s much we need to talk about. But for now, we must hurry. We’ve dealt with your jailers, but there could be more on the way.’

‘Right,’ Richard agreed. Then he paused. ‘But where are we going?’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Robin asked, wagging his brows at him. ‘We’re going to take back your kingdom!’

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

The archery tournament was nearing its final round and the sheriff of Nottingham was still in the lead. Which should have made him happy but instead only filled him with frustration.

Where was Robin Hood? Why hadn't he shown?

Maybe the whole thing had been a mistake. Maybe Robin didn't really feel the way he once felt about Marian; Or maybe she'd gotten word to him somehow—warned, him of the trap—and he'd decided to stay away. There were plenty of reasons he might not show. But when the sheriff had tried to suggest them to the prince, he'd almost had his head bitten off. The lion was still sour with him over his failed attack in the forest. Had Sir Hiss not intervened.

reminding the prince of the sheriff's overall usefulness in collecting taxes, he was pretty sure he would have already been back at his father's old job, shoeing horses for the rest of his days.

Which meant he needed to redeem himself—not by winning a tournament but by snaring the kingdom's number one enemy.

Robin had better show up—and soon.

The sheriff glanced over at the pavilion. Marian was there, sitting beside Prince John. The vixen hadn't been at the tournament earlier, and for a moment the sheriff had worried that perhaps Robin had already squirreled her away somehow, getting the jump on everyone. But she was sitting prettily next to the prince, dressed in a lavender gown, looking quite pale and troubled—which made the sheriff feel a little better.

One way or another, he thought, we'll put you in your proper place.

As they cleared the field to start preparing for the final round, the sheriff decided to head over to the pavilion to learn if there was any Robin update he hadn't yet heard. When he reached the tent, he bowed low to the prince, who was too busy chatting with a jovial bear in a strange purple suit to pay him any mind. Sighing, he turned to Marian instead.

‘M’lady,’ he said. ‘You have decided to join us at last.’

She fanned herself with a small handkerchief. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I’m afraid I have not been well this morning. And so His Majesty gave me leave to rest up before coming out.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ he said, hoping he sounded sincere. ‘After all, this must be an exciting day for you. The day you will meet your future husband!’ He grinned, knowing full well it was not exciting for her at all,

‘Where’s Robin?’ Prince John bellowed, preventing Marian from responding. His eyes drilled into the sheriff. ‘Why isn’t he here yet?’

The sheriff sighed. ‘He’s probably just waiting for the final round,’ he assured the prince. ‘This way he can sweep in, win the whole thing and take off with his rescued bride.’ He rolled his eyes. ‘Of course we’re not going to let that happen,’ he added, catching the lion’s angry scowl.

‘You better not!’ Prince John growled. ‘And hurry up with it all! I’m well past my first afternoon nap and I’m getting dreadfully bored.’

‘Yes, sire. Of course, sire,’ the sheriff muttered, bowing in obedience. But inside he was furious. What was he supposed to do? Just make Robin appear out of thin air? Why was this becoming his problem?

‘Oh! Excuse me!’ Marian suddenly blurted out. ‘I think I’m going to be sick!’

She rose to her feet, swaying from side to side. The purple-suited bear leapt up and grabbed her by the waist, preventing her

from falling.

‘Are you all right, little lady?’ he asked.

Prince John groaned. ‘Can you not be sick in my pavilion?’ He looked around. ‘Where’s your lady-in-waiting?’

‘I . . . don’t know. Ohhh.’ Marian clutched her stomach as if in pain.

The bear put his arm around her. ‘I’ll find her mistress’. Leave it to me! This way you don’t have to miss a thing.’

‘Thank you,’ Prince John said. ‘At least someone is willing to help around here.’ He turned back to the field. Meanwhile, the sheriff watched as the bear lead Marian out of the pavilion and towards the castle.

‘Who was that?’ he asked. ‘He looks . . . familiar?’

‘Does he?’ Sir Hiss asked, suddenly interested. ‘You know him? Do you think it’s . . . ?’

The sheriff scratched his ear. ‘He’s definitely not Robin Hood,’ he said. ‘But... I don’t know?’

At that moment, the trumpets sounded and the announcer called the contestants to the field; it was time for the final round. The sheriff gave Sir Hiss an apologetic look, then headed out to take his place. He felt a thrill of excitement as the cheers from the crowd rose to his ears. Finally he was getting the respect he deserved!

The announcer went over the rules. The animal closest to the bull's-eye—in a target farther back than ever before— would win the entire pot: the golden arrow and the paw of the lovely Marian.

The remaining contenders lined up quickly, eager for their chance. Bunnies, birds, a couple of bears—but no foxes, the sheriff noted irritably. And no-one who looked as if they were in disguise.

One by one the contestants shot their arrows. Many got close, but none quite hit the faraway bull's-eye. Even the turtle who had hit three bull's-eyes in the preliminary rounds got distracted by a flash of light from the audience, and his shot went wild.

Finally it was the sheriff's turn. He stepped into place, grasping an arrow in his right paw while holding the bow waist high with his left. Drawing in a breath, he laid the arrow shaft on the bow's rest, making sure the odd fletching pointed sideways. When he was all positioned, he swallowed hard, then pulled the arrow back and let it fly.

It hit the bull's-eye dead-on.

'Huzzah!' he cried, raising his bow in the air in triumph. He kicked up his feet, doing a little victory dance, while the crowd cheered him on. And for a beautiful, fleeting moment, he let himself forget everything else. He was not just some sheriff. He was a champion.

MARI MANCUS1

And even Robin himself couldn't take that away from him.

'Mind if I have a go?'

He whirled around. A strange stork he hadn't seen before was standing behind him, wearing an olive tunic and a large purple hat with a brim that covered his eyes. He looked so odd that at first the sheriff wanted to laugh. But then it struck him . . .

Was this him? Was this Robin Hood at last?

He glanced over to the prince's pavilion. Prince John had risen from his seat and was rubbing his paws together in glee. Sir Hiss, by his side, was flicking his tongue madly. The sheriff swallowed hard. So they thought it was Robin too.

He turned back to the stork, his heart pounding. 'By all means,' he said. 'Give it your best go.'

He stepped aside to allow the stork room. The stork raised his bow, nocked his arrow and, without a pause, let it fly. The sheriff watched, heart in his throat, as the arrow soared through the air, straight at the bull's-eye—not only hitting it but slicing the sheriff's arrow in two.

The crowd went wild. The sheriff grimaced, disappointed that he'd lost. But then he reminded himself that while he may have lost the contest, he'd won so much more. For finally Robin had revealed himself. Finally he could

PRINCESS OF T K I E V E S

be arrested. Finally the sheriff could put all this nonsense behind him and life could go back to normal.

It was a pretty big win.

He stalked over to the stork. "Not so fast," he growled. Reaching out, he yanked the hat off his head and pulled off his fake beak. 'Now we've got you, Robin Hood!'

There was a gasp from the crowd. At first the sheriff wasn't sure why. But then he did a double take at the fox in front of him and his jaw dropped practically to his feet.

'What?' he cried. 'But you're not—'

Maid Marian beamed. 'Surprise,' she said. 'I win.'

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Prince John couldn't believe it. He just couldn't believe it. All that work, all that planning, and Maid Marian—who was supposed to be sick—was somehow out there winning the archery tournament?

How was it possible?

Sir Hiss also looked dazed. ⁴'I don't understand,' he cried. 'How did she do this?'

'Guess you shoulda given the lady a little more credit,' Sir Reginald drawled, stepping back into the pavilion and plopping down on his chair. Prince John scowled. Why had he invited this stranger to sit with him again? It had been amusing at first. Now it was just annoying to have him here, bearing witness to the prince's defeat.

‘Sir Hiss!’ he growled. ‘This is all your fault!’ He grabbed the snake by the neck and shook him. ‘Where’s Robin Hood? I want Robin Hood!’

Meanwhile, the other animals were rushing Marian onto the stage. The presenter, a handsomely dressed tiger, brought out the golden arrow sitting on a red velvet pillow. He handed it to Marian and smiled. She took it and raised it above her head in triumph.

The animals whooped and hollered like she was some hero. Prince John squeezed his paws into fists, his rage growing by the second.

The presenter looked sheepish. ‘And, uh, I can’t actually give you your second prize,’ he said with an impish shrug. ‘Since, well, you *were* the second prize?’

Marian grinned. ‘Pm all right with that?’

‘Speech! Speech!’ cried the other animals. Prince John rolled his eyes. Would this humiliation ever end?

Marian stepped to the edge of the stage, still clutching the arrow in her paws. ‘Thank you for this honour?’ she said. ‘You all shot well and deserve to be up here with me, sharing this glory. Which is why I plan to melt down the arrow and share the gold it yields with every citizen of Nottingham?’

The crowd went wild again, hopping up and down, cheering their lungs out. Prince John squirmed in his seat.

‘She can’t do that!’ he grunted. ‘Can she do that?’

‘It seems she’s doin’ it,’ Sir Reginald replied helpfully.

Marian continued. ‘Also, there is one other animal I’d like to call up onto the stage. An animal I would like to share this honour with. One who has been by my side from the start?’

Prince John’s eyes widened. He looked at Sir Hiss. ‘Do you think...?’ he whispered, a sudden hope surging inside of him. Maybe his plan hadn’t failed after all. He waved frantically for the sheriff, calling him over. When he arrived, the prince whispered in his ear, ‘If she brings Robin onstage, arrest him. In fact, arrest both of them!’

The sheriff gave a curt nod, then dashed off to get ready. Prince John sat at the edge of his seat, waiting with bated breath. A moment later a hunched figure, covered by a green cloak with a very distinctive crest emblazoned on the front, limped onto the stage.

‘Robin’s cloak!’ Prince John cried. ‘It really is him!’

He glanced over at Sir Hiss, surprised to see the snake frowning.

‘What?’ he demanded. ‘It’s Robin Hood! It has to be!’

The snake turned slowly, his beady eyes filled with fear. ‘I don’t think that’s—’

Suddenly the audience cried out, all at once—like a universal gasp. Prince John turned slowly back to the stage, his heart beating fast as he gazed upon the now uncloaked figure standing at Marian’s side.

PRINCESS OF THIEVES

It wasn’t Robin Hood at all.

It was King Richard.

‘Oh, no,’ John whispered. ‘No, no, no!’

The entire field of animals turned to look at him. Their faces were pale with shock—and anger. Prince John opened his mouth to say something—anything—but then realised there was nothing he could say. Not with his brother standing onstage. Alive.

He bolted from his seat, ready to run. But before he could get far, he felt something sharp and pointy at his back.

‘Not so fast,’ drawled Sir Reginald. ‘You’re not going anywhere.’ He grabbed Sir Hiss by the neck, holding him up. ‘And neither is your slippery snake.’

Uh-oh.

Prince John's mind raced. He turned and waved his paws at Richard. 'Brother!' he cried. 'You're alive! So wonderful! Such great news! Who would have thought?'

Richard roared, so loud everyone was forced to cover their ears. Prince John felt his knees buckling under him. He started pointing at Sir Hiss.

'It was his idea!' he cried. 'It was his plan all along!'

He felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to find none other than Robin Hood standing at his side. The fox smiled slyly.

M A R. I M A N C ti S I

*1 hear you've been looking for me, he said- 'Well, here I am?

'You!' John sputtered. 'Why, you—'

Robin, patted him on the shoulder, then turned to die king. 'Shall I take him away?'

Richard nodded. 'Please do. We have no more need for a phony king here in England?

The animals cheered. And John realised, miserably, he was finally getting his applause—but not for die reasons he'd hoped.

'Mummy!" he sobbed, sticking his thumb in his mouth as his own guard Joffrey stepped up to help Robin escort him and Sir Hiss down the field, towards the castle dungeons. 'Oh, Mummy!'

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE,

‘Wow! I’ve never seen so much food in all my life!’ cried Tagalong as she and her rabbit family entered the castle’s great hall. Skippy rolled his eyes, trying to play it cool. But inside he was leaping with excitement.

The invitation had come from Marian herself, for all the creatures of Nottingham. And from the looks of the crowded tables, everyone had shown up. They were going to need all that food and then some!

Mother and Father lead their fourteen children down a row until they found empty spots next to Toby and his family. They sat down, taking up almost the entire bench, and Tagalong started grabbing food off the table and shoving it into her mouth.

‘Manners!’ Mother Rabbit scolded. ‘Have I taught you nothing?’ But Skippy caught a twinkle in her eye. She was happy. They were all happy. They had food. They had peace. And they even had their father back. Life was good.

Thanks to me, he decided. Why, I’m basically a hero! Even if no-one realises it.

A bell rang and the hall grew silent. All eyes turned to the king’s table, which had been taken off the stage and lowered to the floor to sit at the same level as the other guests. It was filled with other animals—Richard’s knights who had been with him in the war, at least according to Toby. They’d been imprisoned or outlawed during Prince John’s reign, but now they were free. And by the looks of the food on their plates, they were ready to make up for lost time.

Skippy watched as King Richard rose to his feet at the centre of the table. He was dressed in a rich red robe and wore a crown that sat properly on his giant head. His mane was still a little straggly from his time in prison, but it was growing back in nicely.

He cleared his throat. ‘Animals of England,’ he announced, ‘thank you for coming this evening. I can’t tell you how nice it is to see all your faces again.’

‘We like seeing your face too, m’lord!’ yelled someone from the back. Everyone laughed, including the king.

‘Well, that’s good to hear!’ he joked. Then he turned

serious. ‘I wanted to invite you here to the castle so I could personally thank you, all of you. You all played a role in my taking back the throne. I couldn’t have done it without you?’ He smiled. ‘But there are a few animals I wanted to single out for exceptional praise. Those who risked their lives to find me and help me escape?’ He smiled, turning to the two foxes on his right.

‘Robin and Marian, please stand?’ he said.

The two rose to their feet. Robin was wearing a fine green tunic, trimmed in gold, and Marian wore a powder blue gown of the softest silk. Both had big smiles on their faces.

The crowd broke out into cheers. But Skippy made sure he cheered the loudest and the longest—until his mother put her paw over his mouth to shush him.

Robin bowed to King Richard. ‘As much as I love taking credit for things?’ he joked, ‘this honour should go straight to Marian. She’s the one who never gave up on you or your kingdom. Without her bravery—and her stubbornness’—he winked, and everyone laughed—‘we would all still be lost?’ His eyes shone as he gazed at Marian. Beside Skippy, Sis sighed happily.

‘Aw?’ she said. ‘True love?’

‘To Maid Marian!’ cried King Richard, raising his glass in a toast.

MARI MANCUSI

‘To Marian,’ repeated all the animals in the banquet hall, and then they drank from their cups. Skippy realised his was carrot juice. And it was delicious.

They dug into their meals, chatting about their adventures, eating so much they'd probably have to waddle home. But that was all right with Skippy. As he reached for yet another portion of clover pudding, his father smiled at him from across the table.

He had his family back. He had a full belly. And ,.

Remembering, he reached into his bag and brushed his paw against his gold coin. It was still there. He couldn't wait to spend it.

EPILOGUE.

The moon was bright that night, large and orange and hanging low on the horizon—so low, in fact, you could almost imagine reaching up and plucking it from the sky to hold it in your hand. Crickets seemed to chirp a symphony while a gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the old apple tree standing in the centre of the garden.

It was under this tree that two young foxes stepped towards each other, silhouetted by the bright, low-hanging moon. They looked at each other and smiled.

‘Well, well, here we are again,’ Robin said, looking out over the rows of rosebushes. ‘It’s been a while.’

‘Three years,’ Marian agreed. ‘Though I remember it like it was yesterday.’

‘I made you a promise that day,’ Robin said. He hung his head. ‘I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to fulfil it.’ He looked up, meeting Marian’s eyes with his own. ‘But I’m here now. And if you still wish it, I will do everything in my power to ensure nothing breaks us apart, ever again.’

‘Of course I do,’ Marian replied, smiling shyly at him. ‘I wish it more than anything in the world.’

He looked relieved. ‘I’m glad to hear it,’ he said. Then he asked, ‘So how’s life on the king’s council? Everything you ever dreamed of and

more?’

The council had been reinstated immediately after Richard’s return to the throne. And Marian had finally been given her promised spot as the king’s number one advisor. They’d asked Robin too, but he decided sitting indoors in a stuffy room discussing politics wasn’t exactly his thing. He’d rather work with the animals outside, along with his Merry Men, teaching them combat and survival skills so they’d be able to fend for themselves should anything happen in the future. No-one, it seemed, wanted to take their newfound peace for granted.

‘It’s a lot of work,’ Marian admitted. ‘But I love every minute of it. And Richard is so grateful for my advice. It feels like I’m truly making a difference.’

‘You are. I can see it every day in Nottingham,’ Robin assured her. ‘Everyone’s happy. Everyone’s reunited. I

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haven’t seen it this good in a very long time.¹ He poked her lightly in the shoulder. ‘And it’s all thanks to you.’

‘I think it was a team effort,’ she argued with a laugh, ‘I couldn’t have done it alone.’

‘Fair,’ he said with a grin. ‘Which reminds me, what have the council and Richard decided on for our phony king and his cowardly cobra?’

Marian rolled her eyes. ‘Well, Sir Hiss has been sentenced to a lifetime of labor in the rock mines,’ she told him. ‘That was an easy decision after he was forced to confess his part in the attack. But I think Richard’s been a little more torn about his brother. You see, Sir Hiss also confessed to hypnotising John to get him to do his bidding, taking advantage of his grief over losing his mother. So not everything that happened was his

fault. Not that he shouldn't pay for his crimes, of course. He was greedy and selfish, and the animals suffered under his reign. But at the same time, he did spare Richard's life when Sir Hiss was ready to kill him. So I think Richard feels he may deserve a second chance.¹

'I don't know...' Robin made a face. 'He's pretty awful.'¹ 'He's also family. And you know Richard. He's very loyal.' Marian shrugged. 'Even to those who don't quite deserve it.'

'That sounds like my king,'¹ Robin agreed. Then he laughed. 'Though those in the villages are less inclined to mercy. You should hear the new song Allan-a-Dale is singing about John in the taverns. It has the animals rolling on the ground laughing every time.'

'I can only imagine!' Marian said. 'I'll have to come by to hear it myself one of these days.'

She went quiet, realising Robin was staring at her, his eyes large and loving. She reached out, brushing his cheek with her paw. 'I'm so happy,' she whispered.

'Me too,' Robin agreed. Then his breath hitched. 'Also, there's something else I've been wanting to ask you, Marian.'

His words sounded so sincere they sent a shiver down her spine. 'About the council?' she asked.

'No.' He shook his head. 'About you.'

She watched, shocked, as he dropped to one knee, taking her paw in his own. 'I love you more than life itself, Marian. Will you marry me?'

Tears sprang to Marian's eyes. Her heart swelled. For a moment she couldn't speak. Then she nodded. 'Of course I will, you silly fox,' she declared. 'Took you long enough to ask me.'

Robin leap to his feet. He grabbed Marian by die waist and twirled her around. When he set her down, he closed his eyes and leaned in close, brushing a tender kiss against her lips. She sighed in pleasure and kissed him back. And for a moment it felt as if they were the only two animals in the world.

PRINCESS OF THIEVES

Until they heard a noise in the bushes.

They whirled around, only to find three very excited bunnies and one turtle in glasses peering out from behind a hedge. Robin laughed and shook his head.

‘Have you lot been there this entire time?’ he scolded.

They looked at one another sheepishly. ‘Sort of?’

Marian beckoned for the children to come out from the bushes and join them. ‘Well, then I guess that means you’ll have to be my maid of honour at our wedding,’ she told Sis.

‘What?’ Sis cried. ‘Me? Really?’

‘And you two must be my best men,’ Robin said to Skippy and Toby.

‘What about me?’ asked little Tagalong, tugging on Marian’s skirt. ‘Do I get to be something in your wedding?’

‘You can be my flower girl. How about that?’ Marian said with a smile.

The little bunny cheered, ‘Flowers! I love flowers!’

‘Just don’t eat them,’ Skippy teased.

‘I wouldn’t do that! Not to Maid Marian’s flowers!’ Tagalong retorted, shoving her brother. He giggled.

‘I trust that you won’t,’ Marian assured her, patting her on the head. Then she looked over at the four of them. ‘Of course, this will all take some time. And a lot of planning. But for tonight? I have another idea.’

Robin raised an eyebrow. ‘Do tell.’

‘Remember when we used to sneak out at night and roll down the castle hill and race to the bottom?’

His eyes lit up. ‘Of course I do. I’d always win.’

‘A dreadful lie,’ she informed the children. Then she grinned at Robin. ‘Still think your old bones can handle it?’

‘Won’t know unless I try!’ Robin declared. He beckoned to the children. ‘Come on! Last one to the hill is a phony king of England!’

He took off running. Marian and the children chased after him, laughing. ‘No fair! You got a head start!’ Marian admonished.

‘I’m an outlaw, remember? I don’t play by the rules.’

‘Funny. Neither do I,’ Marian replied before leaping onto his back and tackling him to the ground. Then she jumped over him and ran straight for the hill.

‘Now who’s not playing fair?’ Robin protested, trying to scramble to his feet as three bunnies and one turtle trampled him one by one. By the time he made it to the hill, they were all waiting for him.

‘About time you joined us,’ Marian said with a big yawn.

‘I suppose it is,’ he said, giving her a soft look. ‘I’m just glad to be here now.’

‘Me too,’ Marian agreed. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Toby and Skippy made faces at each other.

P R I N C E S S O F T H I E V E S

‘You two kiss a lot, Toby pointed out, looking offended i thought we were racing!’ added Skippy.

‘We are,’ Robin assured him. ‘And I’m going to beat you all?’

He threw himself down the hill and began rolling as fast as he could. The bunnies and turtle squealed and gave pursuit. Soon all four of them were tumbling fast.

Meanwhile Marian remained atop the hill, taking a moment before joining in, watching them roll and laugh and squeal—not a care in the world. Her eyes blurred with happy tears.

This was how it should be. They’d saved the land. They’d saved their king.

They’d gone from outlaws to heroes . . . together.

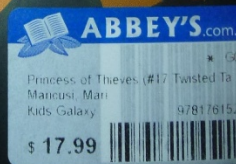
What if Maid Marian were the real outlaw?

Returning from an extended trip abroad, Maid Marian finds that not much about her beloved England remains the same. Her best friend, Robin, has been banished; her beloved uncle, King Richard, is dead; and the village of Nottingham and its citizens have been impoverished by taxes.

With the help of her lady's maid, Lady Kluck, Marian decides to take matters into her own paws. She is determined to help all the villagers while also solving the mystery surrounding her uncle's death.

Deep in the woods, she finds Robin and his Merry Men.

Will they help Marian with her plan or leave her and Lady Kluck to forge ahead on their own?



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